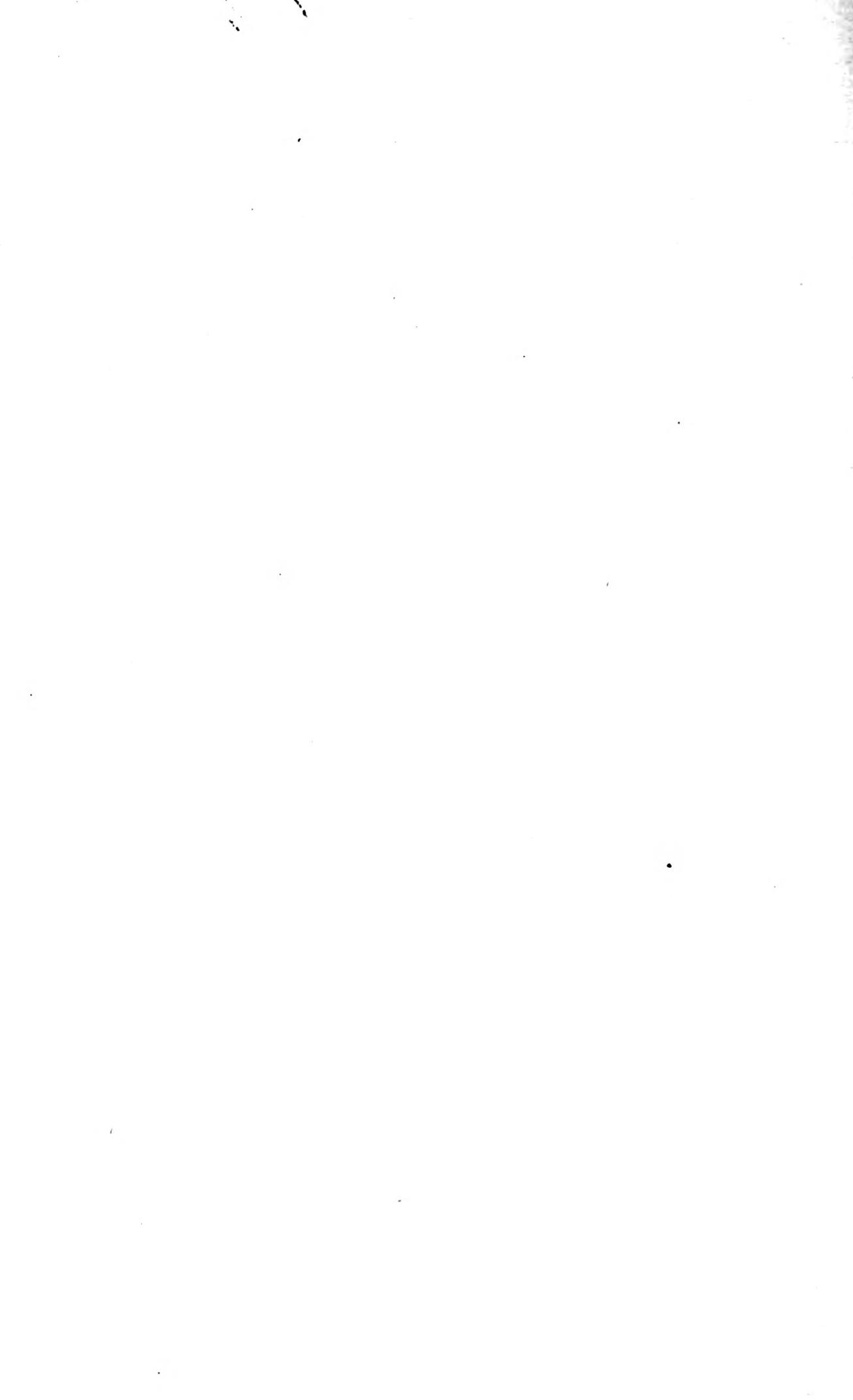


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A ROMANCE OF MODERN LONDON.



M. H. H. Yorke

A ROMANCE OF MODERN LONDON.

A Novel.

BY
CURTIS YORKE,

AUTHOR OF

“HUSH! “THE MYSTERY OF BELGRAVE SQUARE,
“THE BROWN PORTMANTEAU,” “DUDLEY,”
“THE WILD RUTHVENS,” “THAT LITTLE GIRL,” &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

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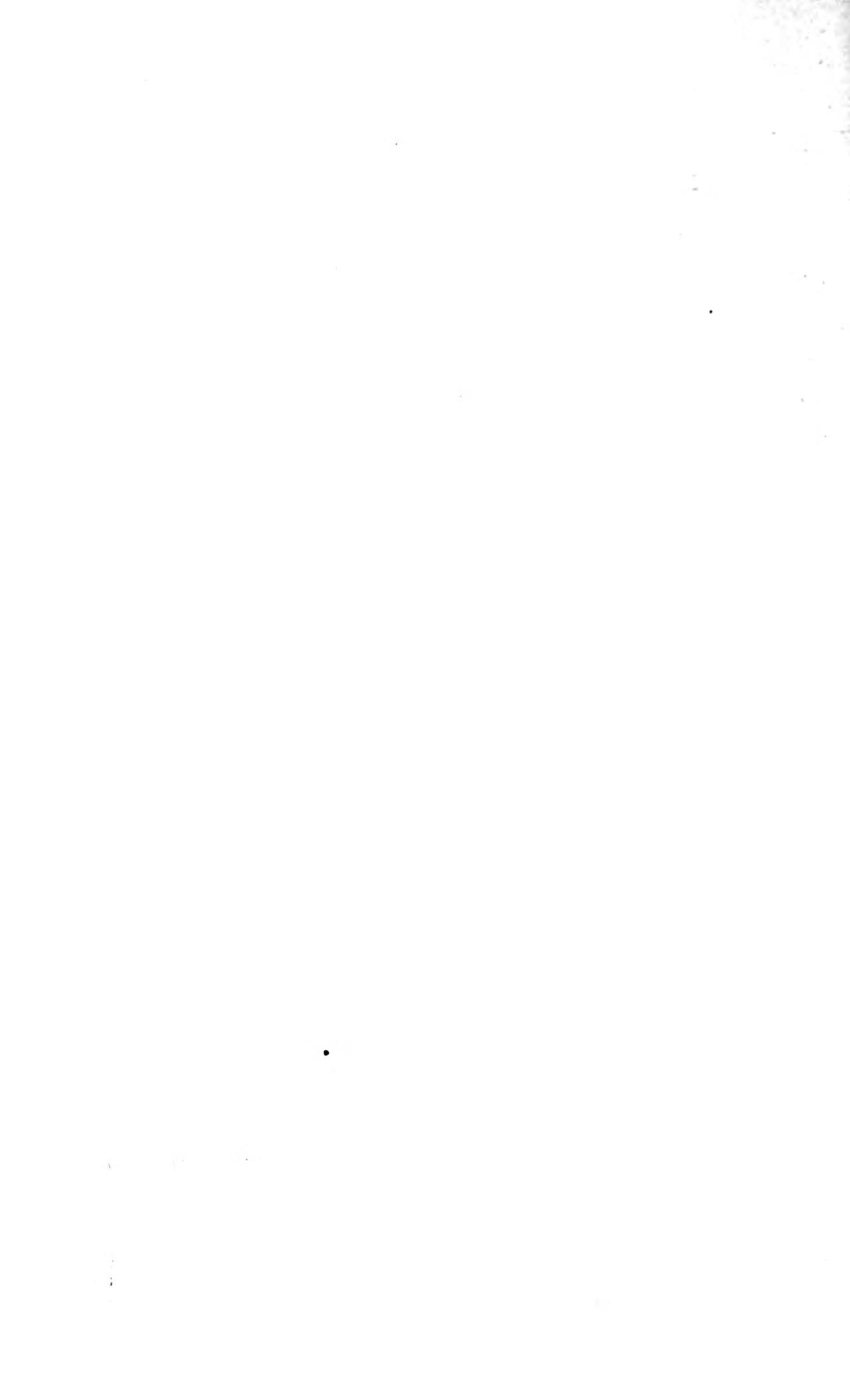
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A ROMANCE OF MODERN LONDON.

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CHAPTER I.

ECLIPSE.

“I have known how sickness bends,
I have known how sorrow breaks—
How quick hopes have sudden ends,
How the heart thinks till it aches
Of the smile of buried friends.”

—E. B. BROWNING.

“Who lives in the stars, Douglas?” said a child’s voice. “Do the angels?”

“Don’t know, little one.”

“Why, Douglas, I thought you knew everything?” and the tiny speaker raised two surprised, reproachful eyes to her companion’s face.

The boy laughed—a short, amused laugh.

“ You silly little thing,” he said. “ I know—just nothing at all.”

“ *Douglas!*” remonstrated the baby voice, “ you do know lots of things.”

Douglas shook his head.

“ No, Bee, not the things I want to know. I mean to, though, some day,” he added, with a curious quietness in his pleasant, boyish voice.

“ When you’re a man, Douglas? ” asked the child.

“ Yes, Bee, when I’m a man,” the boy answered, leaning back in his chair and clasping his hands behind his head.

“ Will it take years and years until you’re a man? ” asked the little one.

“ It’ll take a good many years,” he answered briefly.

Bee smoothed out the skirts of a dilapidated and most viciously ugly doll which lay on her lap, and observed sagely:

“ A year’s a long time—an *awful* long time. Last year I was only a very little girl.”

“And what are you this year?” said Douglas, pulling one of her curls with a good-natured smile.

“I’m six years old,” she answered with an important air. “I’m getting quite a little woman. Mammy says so.”

They were sitting at an open window which looked into a narrow dingy street near Westminster Abbey. The window was very high up, and the room to which it belonged was very small. But the window-sill was bright with late summer flowers, and the window-panes were exquisitely clean, which was more than could be said for the general run of window-panes in Garth Street. The room itself had an equally clean and fresh appearance—even a certain air of refinement. And the same air of refinement characterized the boy and his companion. He was a straight-limbed, well-made lad of fifteen; his face was kind and strong, with resolute lips, and keen, black-lashed blue eyes, which faced the world from beneath level brows too strongly marked for beauty.

His child companion was a remarkably pretty little creature, with great grey eyes, and a tangle of curly brown hair—hair that floated about her tiny colourless face, and gave to it an added picturesque beauty.

Garth Street was unusually quiet and deserted on this particular evening. For one thing it was Sunday, and for another thing a fine small rain was falling, a wetting unpleasant rain, which made out-of-door locomotion undesirable. But Douglas and Bee did not mind the rain. They liked it. Douglas was letting it patter down at will upon his dark young head as he leaned over a fragrant tuft of mignonette, and every now and then Bee, kneeling upon her chair, stretched out her little neck, and put out her little red tongue as far as it would go, to catch the fast-falling drops, which, she declared, “tasted nice and warm.”

The summer dusk fell softly, silently; the rain-drops grew lighter and fewer and finally ceased; a few stars twinkled out in the pale sky between the fast-drifting clouds.

Suddenly the door of the room opened and shut, and a woman's voice, low and clear, sounded through the semi-darkness.

"Don't sit at the open window, dears," it said; "the night air is damp and chilly."

Douglas rose instantly and closed the window. Then he put his strong young arm round the slender figure of the newcomer. He was nearly as tall as she; and there was a lingering likeness between the two faces, that were yet so essentially different.

"Are you better, mother darling?" he said in a voice of almost womanly tenderness. "Is the pain gone? Sit down in the easy chair and I will light the candles."

He struck a match and lit a couple of candles in tall, curiously chased brass candlesticks. Candles—in the plural—were a Sunday treat. On other nights they had only one.

The candlelight lit up the little room bravely enough. (If one's room is small, it manifestly takes less light to make it cheerful. Applied variously, this is one of the compen-

sations of existence.) When the blind was drawn down, and the fringed chintz curtain pulled across the window, it looked a very homelike little room. There were one or two good engravings on the walls, a small, but well-filled bookcase in one corner, and, facing the window, a cottage piano of well-polished ebony, with a slender heap of music lying upon it. A mirror framed in dark oak hung over the mantelpiece, and above it a sword and a pair of spurs. A luxuriant, well cared-for hart's-tongue fern occupied the centre of the table.

Mrs. Conrath, the neighbours were wont to remark among themselves, had seen “better days.” But they were not particularly interested in her. For though the pale-faced widow was always gentle and courteous to such of her fellow-lodgers as she came in contact with, she never showed any desire to improve their acquaintance. Nor did she respond to the kindly-meant advances of her landlady. She had lived for three years in Garth Street, and she had not made a single

friend—which the inhabitants (being of a more clannish nature than is usual in London neighbourhoods) denounced as a sign of unwarrantable uppishness, and therefore left her alone. The boy, they added, was as “stuck-up” and “close” as his mother. Little Bee, however, was too young to be either stuck up or close, and she often—when Douglas and his mother were out, and she was left to her own devices—wandered down to the kitchen, where she sat by the fire and “talked that knowin’,” as Mrs. Dobbs, the landlady, said, as to impress that decent woman with the mournfully-announced conviction that “the blessed child was not long for this world—though as healthy and pretty as a pictur’.”

Bee looked a bonnie and winsome wee sprite enough to-night as she nestled up to the tired-looking woman in the armchair, and wound her small soft arms about her neck.

“Poor, poor mammy,” she cooed caressingly. “Douglas and me have been so good

—and we spoke quite, quite low—so as not to wake you up.”

Mrs. Conrath stroked the child’s bright hair without speaking. She was still quite young, with a very sweet, but inexpressibly sad face. It was more than sad ; it was utterly hopeless. All the hope, and nearly all the beauty, had been crushed out of it when she buried her soldier husband three years ago. And it had never come back again. Poor soul ! she had had a sore struggle in these three years, and she had worked very hard. She had succeeded in keeping her son at a good London school until a year ago, when he had insisted upon earning something for himself. He was now office-boy to two easy-going young men, who had a couple of handsomely-furnished rooms in Westminster, where they wrote letters, smoked, and chaffed each other from ten till two, and resumed the same arduous programme from four till half-past five. This was on “busy” days. On other days they got into the office at eleven, and left it at two, to return no more. They paid young Conrath

eight shillings a week, every penny of which munificent sum the lad scrupulously handed over to “the mother.” Mrs. Conrath’s life was bleak and dreary enough ; but it would have been bleaker and drearier still without Douglas. He was old for his years, and singularly companionable ; and in many ways he reminded her forcibly, sometimes almost painfully, of his dead father. There was something very touching in the boy’s manner to his mother. It was a mixture of chivalrous tenderness and unspoken compassion. Only to Douglas did the widow ever speak of the husband who had been her idol ; and many a passionate fit of tearless sobbing had been soothed to rest in Douglas’s loving young arms. She, perhaps, did not realize the shadow her constant grief and melancholy shed around her boy’s life. One is so apt, you know, to forget the depressing effect our indulgence in real or fancied troubles may have upon our house-mates. It would have been but a gloomy life for Douglas, much as he loved his mother, had it not been for little

Bee's sunshiny presence. The sound of her tiny restless feet, her equally restless tongue, and her innocent loving ways, were irresistibly winning and heart-cheering. Gloom was almost impossible where Bee was; and she was as busy, in her inconsequent, baby way, as the indefatigable insect whose name she bore. She was not really a Conrath at all, though the mother and son could hardly have loved her more dearly if she had been. Her advent in the family was in this wise.

One snowy winter night four years ago Captain Conrath had found a tiny child, apparently about two years old, curled up in a weeping, half-frozen bundle on the steps of his club, and had been sorely perplexed and dismayed by the forlorn little atom seizing and clinging to his leg with all the tenacity of childish despair. He was about to relinquish her to the care of the grim-looking policeman who had promptly appeared upon the scene, when something in the child's tear-wet up-turned eyes, some expression in the pathetic

quivering baby lips, gave him an uncomfortable feeling in his throat, and made him sign to the policeman to pause. Such a tiny, forlorn, desolate little creature it looked—this little waif of the midnight and the snow ! And how its eyes, with their piteous upward look, recalled the eyes of his baby daughter, who lay peacefully under the frost and snow in a distant graveyard ! She had looked up at him like that—with childish eyes full of suffering — the night she died. Charlie Conrath was soft - hearted—foolishly so, his comrades said. Anyway, he couldn't bear to think of this poor mite being carried off to the police station until such time as her friends should discover her whereabouts. So, having failed to elicit anything except sobs from the poor shivering baby, he told the man to hail a hansom, picked up his weeping, snow-soaked protégée, and drove off with her to his home in Kensington Gore—leaving his name and address with the astonished policeman, in case inquiries should be made. But no inquiries ever were made ;

and Edith Conrath welcomed the desolate waif with wistful tears, and took it into the place in her heart that death had left desolate, and called it by her dead baby's name. A year later tender-hearted, easy-going Charlie Conrath had followed his little daughter, and left his gentle young wife to face the world alone—except for the children. Except for the children! God only knew what she would have done in these dark days except for "the children." Their innocent caresses, their loving childish attempts to soothe the grief they were too young to understand, saved her perhaps from madness and despair. Though a singularly lovable fellow, Captain Conrath had also been almost incredibly thoughtless and careless of the future. He was hopelessly in debt, it was found, and it had never occurred to him, apparently, to make any provision for his family in the event of his death. So after the sale of most of the furniture in her pretty home, the young widow took rooms in obscure and dingy Garth Street, and went

back to the life of hard work from which her handsome young soldier-lover had taken her thirteen years before—the monotonous, soul-withering, thankless, ill-paid work of teaching “other people’s children.” Yes—it had been a hard struggle; and something in her sunken eyes and worn cheeks told that it had been rendered harder by ill-health as well as poverty and care. For Edith Conrath was slowly but steadily sinking under the relentless grasp of a mortal disease. Her days were numbered, she knew. The grave that held her husband and child waited for her.

To-night she looked almost ghastly in the bright candlelight, for she had had a day of terrible pain, and she felt sorely unfit to begin her week-day duties on the morrow. Bee had perched herself on a stool behind her “mammy’s” chair, and was stroking the faded wavy hair with clumsily loving baby fingers. Mrs. Conrath caught one little hand in hers, as it strayed about her neck, and pressed her lips to it.

“Time you were in bed, my little one,”

she said, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece.

“No, mammy,” coaxingly replied the small maiden. “I’m not sleepy, and I haven’t had my bread and milk—nor I haven’t read about my little Samuel.”

“Here’s your bread and milk,” said Douglas, catching her up in his arms and carrying her over to the sideboard, where a cup of milk stood side by side with a slice of bread. “And when you’ve finished it, get your book, and you shall read to mother and me, like a clever little woman as you are.”

Having disposed of her supper, Bee went with an important air to a certain corner of the little bookcase, and produced a weighty and dilapidated volume, rich in many highly-coloured illustrations, principally of a Scriptural nature. She gravely turned over the leaves until she came to the picture she called “her little Samuel,” upon which she proceeded to dissertate at her own sweet will. Then, kneeling upon Douglas’s knee, with sweetly-solemn face and tightly-shut eyes, she

murmured an extremely conversational, not to say free and easy, little prayer — that nevertheless had something indefinably touching in its lisping petitions—and having bid good-night to Douglas, trotted into the adjoining room, whither Mrs. Conrath presently followed her.

Douglas seated himself near one of the candles and began to pore over a somewhat worn copy of “Plutarch’s Lives.” He was passionately fond of reading, and fortunately for him the late Captain Conrath’s library, though small, was better selected than is altogether common in men of his profession. Douglas—like most resolute persevering natures—read very slowly, invariably uttering each word mentally as he passed it; and he possessed the accompanying faculty of remembering everything he read, as lightning skippers of literature rarely if ever do. When his mother came back into the room again he closed his book, and took a low seat beside her chair, caressing her hand silently.

“I think you are getting thinner, little

mother," he said regretfully. "I really do. I wish to goodness I could earn a bigger screw, and then you wouldn't have to toil away at that miserable teaching day after day. I seem to be an awful while in growing up," he added with a sigh.

"My dear boy," his mother answered, smiling faintly—"you are growing up very fast, it seems to me. As for my teaching, why, I like it. It was all I had to depend on before I met—your father."

Her voice faltered. She never, even now, could speak of her husband without faltering speech and quivering lip. He had come like a glory of awakening sunshine into her dull, sordid girlhood; and her faithful woman's heart cried out for him, not less, but more, as the years went on. It depends very much upon our surroundings whether time is the "great consoler" he is popularly supposed to be. There are griefs, not a few, that grow the bitterer for keeping.

"You cannot like it," resumed the boy, almost fiercely. "And it makes me wretched

—it drives me half-mad to see you going out in all weathers—looking so thin and ill—and I can do nothing to prevent it. In a year or two there will be an end of it, though,” he added with a sudden compression of his young lips—“on that I’m determined.”

“ Yes, my boy—there will be an end of it—soon,” was the quiet answer.

“ What do you mean, mother? Why do you smile in that strange way?” asked Douglas in a startled voice.

“ Dear—do you not understand?” she answered, passing her thin hand over his thick dark hair, and looking up at him with wistful eyes. “ Do you not know that I am—very ill?—that I can never—be any better?”

“ *Mother!* ”

There was an anguished incredulity in the boy’s voice and eyes as he flung himself on his knees and caught his mother’s hands in his. She pressed them convulsively.

“ Mother, you are mistaken. It can’t be true,” he said with a half break in his voice.

“ You will — you *must* get better ! You remember how ill you were last year, and——”

“ No, my boy, I shall not get better,” she answered steadily. “ You must not deceive yourself. I have wanted to speak to you of this—for a long time ; but—I was afraid. I knew, dear, that you would — feel it so.” And the sweet voice shook a little. Then she added, “ I saw the doctor yesterday, and he says—that it is a question of—weeks.”

The boy’s face had grown very white.

“ It can’t be true ! ” he cried breathlessly and passionately. “ You are so young, and sweet, and pretty ! Oh, *mother* ! ”

He rose abruptly and went to the window, where he stood for a long time in silence, gazing out unseeingly into the night. No tears dimmed his eyes ; a strong dull aching tugged at his heart. He had hardly been conscious until now how dearly he loved his mother. And somehow he had never thought of the possibility of her death. He had looked forward to coming years, when he

should have compassed by his earnings a cosy, luxurious home for her—a home where he and she and “the little one” should live blissfully and peacefully — a home which should never know death, nor sorrow, nor care. And now?

A half-sob rose in his throat, but he choked it back.

“Why are we so poor?” his heart echoed fiercely. “Poverty and grief have killed her—and I can do nothing!”

He shut his hands in a kind of impotent despair.

Then his mother’s voice called him back to her. He knelt beside her chair, and took her gently in his arms.

“Try to get well, darling,” he whispered with an unruly catch in his voice. “It won’t be so very long, please God, before I earn enough for you to have good doctors and proper food and change of air. But oh, mother, mother” — the passionate young voice rang out despairingly—“don’t talk of *dying!* Can nothing be done?”

Her eyes answered him.

He buried his face in her neck and sobbed.

Her tears fell fast too, as she held him more closely to her, and whispered loving, broken words that could not comfort him.

In a minute or two he checked his sobs with a violent effort, remembering how his grief would agitate her. For a time there was silence, broken only by the hurried breathing of each. Then she said :

“ Douglas, can you bear to listen to me for a little, dear ? ”

He pressed her hand without speaking.

“ It is about little Bee,” she went on after a short pause. “ Douglas, I feel it is laying a heavy burden on your shoulders, for she has no real claim upon you. But—your father was so fond of her—I cannot bear to think of the dear little one—— Oh, my dear, what will become of you both when I am gone ? ”

Her voice broke, and she turned away her face.

“ Mother, don’t worry about Bee,” said the

boy unsteadily. “I will take care of her. Trust me, dear. I can work for her and for myself too.”

“No one knows she is not really your sister,” went on his mother. “No one need know. She need not know either—at least, not yet.”

“No, dear, what difference does it make? I love her just the same as if she were my sister,” said the lad in a mechanical, far-away voice; for he could not think of Bee just then.

“Another thing,” said Mrs. Conrath feverishly, after a minute, “I want you to promise me—to *swear* to me—that you will never accept a penny of your uncle’s, of Evan Conrath’s charity. He cut your father dead because he married me; he refused either to see him or speak to him; he returned his letters unopened. He wrote me a most cruel and insulting letter when your father died. You shall never be indebted to him—*never!*”

Her thin cheeks were crimson; her eyes glittered almost fiercely. Douglas felt that she was trembling from head to foot.

“You need not fear, mother,” he said slowly. “I swear I never will.”

His mother lay back in her chair, utterly exhausted by her brief excitement; her lips were pale, her eyes closed.

Douglas felt a sudden vague alarm.

“Shall I get your medicine, dear?” he whispered anxiously.

She made a gesture of assent; and by and by she sat up, and a faint tinge of colour came back to her lips.

“I will go to bed, I think,” she said wearily.

Douglas helped her to her room, saw that she had all she wanted—as he did every night—then took her in his arms with a sorrowful still gentleness very unlike his usual boyish hug and good-night kiss.

“Good-night, my darling,” murmured his mother brokenly. “My good loving boy. You have been more than a son to me, Douglas. God will surely bless you, and reward you as you deserve.” Then she added wistfully, “Perhaps I have not acted as was

best for you, my son. But I did it for the best. Always believe that, dear. Now, once more, good-night."

He kissed her hurriedly, for he could not trust himself to speak. Then he went up to his own bedroom, which was a small, low-ceiled apartment at the top of the house, and flung himself face downward upon his bed, trying to realize the crushing sorrow that had come upon him.



CHAPTER II.

THE SEED OF AMBITION.

“ Face and figure of a child,—
Though too calm, you think, and tender,
For the childhood you would lend her.

“ Yet child-simple, undefiled,
Frank, obedient, waiting still
On the turnings of your will.

“ Moving light, as all young things,
As young birds, or early wheat
When the wind blows over it.”

—E. B. BROWNING.

MRS. CONRATH did not set out on her usual daily pilgrimage on the following morning. She could not. When Douglas went into her room according to his wont before leaving, even his inexperienced eyes saw that she was very ill. She would not allow him to send for the doctor; she would be better in the afternoon, she said.

Her son got through his duties that day

with a heavy heart, and hurried home to Garth Street with all possible speed. It was a dull, cheerless day, and a strange insurmountable depression weighed upon him. Bee met him at the head of the stairs, her small face scared and white. Behind her stood the landlady, Mrs. Dobbs.

“Oh, Master Conrath,” said the latter, lifting her apron to her eyes. “I was just agoin’ to send for you. Your poor ma was took that bad just after you went out, and we sent for the doctor, and——” Here she stopped and dried her eyes anew.

“Is she — dead?” articulated the boy hoarsely, leaning against the wall, and feeling sick and giddy.

“No, Master Conrath, she is not dead; but the doctor he do say she can’t last the night.” And the speaker shook her head mournfully.

Douglas mechanically put her aside, and went into his mother’s room. She was lying quite still; and her eyes were closed, her face ghastly pale.

“Mother!” he uttered despairingly, flinging himself on his knees by the bedside.

She opened her eyes, and laid her hand caressingly on his head. But she seemed too weak for speech.

Little Bee, with round, awe-struck eyes, climbed upon the bed. Dying! The word conveyed no meaning to her childish mind.

After a minute or two, Douglas, with a white, terrible look of misery on his young face, rose and went out. When he returned the doctor was with him. But alas! there was nothing more that medical skill could do. Another fierce attack of almost unbearable agony, and then the patient fell into a deep sleep. And from that sleep she awoke—not in this world, but another.

* * * * *

Little Bee wept, as children weep for a crossed will or a broken toy.

“Oh, mammy — I want mammy,” she wailed.

But her baby-heart was consoled by the kitten from next door, which stole in and

executed such wild fantastic gambols that Bee laughed merrily, while yet the tears stood in her eyes.

But Douglas did not weep. He sat, half-stunned, by the dead woman's bedside, almost as white and still as she, with set teeth, and convulsively clenched fingers. He fiercely motioned away the fussy little doctor, with his soothing platitudes—"That it must have come sooner or later; that his dear mother had been in a critical state for a very long time; that she had been mercifully spared further suffering," etc., etc.

"I wish you would let me alone," the boy said in a strange, hard voice. "I know all that. I want to be alone."

And all night he sat there, pressing despairing kisses on the cold forehead, murmuring loving words to the deaf ears, feeling all the while that this was some unreal ghastly dream from which he must soon awake, and over which he and his mother would smile together in the morning. He kept murmuring this just above his breath, over and over

again, to assure himself of the truth of his sad self-deception.

Mrs. Dobbs, who came up first thing in the morning — for she was a kind soul — to persuade him to have a cup of tea, declared it gave her “the creeps” to hear him.

Ah, well, there is no need to dwell upon those sad days. Soon — cruelly soon it seemed to Douglas—they took his mother away and laid her beside her dead husband. Bee, from the high window where the musk and mignonette bloomed fragrantly, watched the sad little procession wind its way slowly down the rain-washed street. Then she cried bitterly, and no one, not even the kitten, could pacify her—realizing for the first time that her “mammy” had indeed gone away from her, gone away in some strange fashion that held unknown depths of possible loneliness. And Mrs. Dobbs came and took her down to the kitchen, where she remained sadly enough until Douglas came back from the cemetery.

But when Douglas did come back he went

straight to the room that had been his mother's (what a sad conjugation "had been" can be!) and shut himself in there for many hours. And in these hours he left his boyhood behind him for ever. As he lay there with his young heart full of a fierce tearing agony, it seemed to him that his life had come to an end.

The room grew darker, an awful silence throbbed through the air, and seemed to beat in the boy's ears more loudly than any sound. Gradually a pale moon shone in through the uncurtained window, and fell across the bed. The broad silver beam looked weirdly bright, and gave to the surrounding gloom an added desolation. It fell across the pillow just where her dear head had lain so short a time ago. He pressed his lips upon the shining whiteness.

A muffled knocking at the door.

Douglas took no notice. Then the handle rattled noisily, and a pleading pathetic little voice cried sobbingly :

"Let me in, Douglas."

Douglas rose, and unlocked the door,

whereupon Bee entered, a tiny white-robed figure ready for bed. Her brother (she knew him only as her brother) sat down again by the bed, and leaned his head on his hand.

“Douglas, Douglas,” said the quivering baby lips, “I want mammy. Where is she?”

Receiving no answer, she climbed upon his knee and wept; and he laid his head down silently upon her soft brown curls.

“Hush!” he said brokenly at last. “Mammy has gone away, Bee darling, never to come back again. But you must not cry, for she is very happy, and will never have any more pain, nor anything to vex her.”

The little one raised her tear-wet eyes to his.

“Can’t we go too, Douglas?” she sobbed. “I want to go where mammy is.”

Douglas gathered the tiny creature into his arms, feeling that something dear and sacred was still left to him.

“No, no, my wee one,” he said, turning very white. “You would not like to leave me all alone, would you?”

“But you could come too,” wept the child.
“Mammy will be lonely without us.”

The other made no answer to that sad plea. Which of us have not wondered in passionate incredulity if it can be possible that our “loved and lost,” knowing our bitter grief and loneliness for the loss of them, shall not grow sad for a brief space, even amid the joys of Paradise? And so Douglas’s heavy heart wondered—wondered bitterly.

The moon shone in brightly, steadily, lighting up the two sad young faces, and bathing the whole room in clear silver radiance.

“Don’t cry, Douglas,” Bee whispered, her own tears dried in sudden awe at the unwonted sight of his. “We will say our prayers, and perhaps God will bring her back again.”

“No, dear,” he made answer, clasping her very close to him; “God will not bring her back again.”

“Why?” said the child, with piteous quivering lip. “Is He not so kind as you and mammy thought He was?”

“Oh, Bee, hush, my dear,” he broke out with a half cry.

The little one’s words lit up with a sudden flash the darkness of his own rebellious thoughts. What are our first thoughts in the new, strange desolation of some crushing, unlooked-for sorrow? Not characterized by devoutness or resignation always—are they? Under the agony of the surgeon’s knife we are apt to lose sight of the kind, unerring wisdom of the surgeon himself. That knowledge comes afterwards.

“Perhaps, Douglas, dear,” said Bee, with gravely knitted brows, “perhaps God thought mammy would rather be with father than with you and me.”

“Yes, dear—perhaps,” he answered almost inaudibly.

Neither spoke for some time after that, and when at last Douglas bent to look down into the child’s face he saw that she had fallen asleep. Still holding her tightly within his arm, he let his head fall wearily forward upon the bed and lay quite still, for he was worn

out with grief and fasting, and he felt curiously weak and sick. And gradually sleep came to him too. For a little while his sorrow was forgotten.

* * * * *

A few days after Mrs. Conrath's funeral, Douglas's employers—Debenham and Carslake, the firm was called, by the way—thought fit to raise his salary considerably. One of them, Debenham, was a singularly, almost Quixotically, kind - hearted young fellow, much quieter and more thoughtful than his rollicking companion. He was interested in Douglas, and pleased by the lad's respectful manners, and careful performance of his duties.

“And you know,” he languidly remarked one day to Carslake—“it's deuced hard lines on the poor little beggar, having to support his baby sister as well as himself; and dash it all, you know, out of eight shillings a week it simply can't be done.”

Therefore the prospect of starvation which had loomed grimly before Douglas Conrath

and his young charge was, for the time, averted. They moved up yet another stair at Mrs. Dobbs's, and occupied as sitting-room a square light attic next to Douglas's tiny bedroom. Bee was promoted to a still more box-like apartment opening off the sitting-room.

It was hard for the boy to part with his mother's few cherished pieces of furniture; but he set himself to it stoically, and as a duty. One or two things he kept—things of little value, but too sacred for the hands of strangers. The rest had to go. And so he and “the little one” began life again, as it were—life with a difference.

Thus two months passed away.

The children of the poor—especially the poor who have once been otherwise—are apt to leave their childhood swiftly behind them. Douglas, as I have said, was old for his years. Bee was rapidly becoming old for hers. Old-fashioned—according to Mrs. Dobbs—she had always been. But it was a quaint, lovable old-fashionedness—a womanly child-

ishness or a childish womanliness—that endeared her to Douglas's heart more and more. She was growing fast, and might easily have been taken for a child of eight. Indeed she might have been eight for all Douglas knew; for of course all surmises as to her exact age were mere guess-work. Her great ambition was to be Douglas's housekeeper, and it was touching to watch her efforts in this line.

“Am I of use to you, Douglas, my dear?” she used to whisper every night after their frugal evening meal, as she climbed upon his knee. “Could you not do without me?”

And he always answered :

“No, my little Bee—I could not indeed.”

One of her latest and most prized accomplishments was that she could pour out Douglas's tea. True, upon one occasion she had let the teapot fall, and broken a tea-cup thereby—not to mention scalding her poor little hand and arm rather badly—which *fiasco* resulted in Douglas performing this part of his housekeeping himself for the next few nights. But by dint of coaxing and

piteous entreaties and assurances that she would be very, *very* careful, she once more perched nightly behind the tea-tray, and beamed there in happy content. Poor little woman, how much in earnest she was, to be sure!—how impatient to be grown up!—how anxious to perform all her duties exactly as “Mammy” had done! She got up surprisingly early, and having washed and dressed with laborious care, finally went to Douglas to have her frock fastened. Then she went in search of Mrs. Dobbs, and followed her about persistently, carefully observing all she did, and asking so many questions that Mrs. Dobbs’s patience sometimes gave way. If the latter happened to be in a good temper, she allowed Bee to make toast, and carry it upstairs afterwards. If she were not in a good temper—which happened occasionally—the young folks in the attics ate their bread untoasted.

When the little housekeeper had given Douglas his tea, and finished her own bread and milk, she trotted downstairs for his boots.

Then having stood upon a chair to carefully brush every speck of dust from his clothes, she went hand-in-hand with him downstairs to the door, where she stood kissing her hand until he was quite out of sight. Bee—by special arrangement—had dinner with Mrs. Dobbs. Douglas did not come home at his dinner-hour, for the simple reason that a two-penny pie or a couple of sausage-rolls were all he had margin to afford himself in the way of dinner. But he was always home shortly after six, when Bee—unless it were wet—was already dressed in her hat and jacket, to go for a short walk. Then they came back and had tea; and afterwards Douglas taught her a little reading and spelling—for she was very anxious to learn to read—to read in books “with no pictures,” as she gravely informed him. When she had gone to bed in her tiny box-like room, with the door left open that she might see the light of Douglas’s candle, the boy wrote steadily until far into the night. This home-work, which had been procured for him by Mr. Debenham, consisted

in the copying out of various crabbed old manuscripts of which the meaning was generally obscure and the length apparently never-ending. At least so it appeared to the young scribe. However, the remuneration, though of course very small, formed a very welcome addition to his weekly earnings.

* * * * *

It was now nearly Christmas. December snow lay thick in Garth Street. December winds whistled through the well-ventilated attics occupied by the young Conraths. There were no evening walks for Bee now; for when Douglas came home it was quite dark and the street lamps were lighted. But there was always a tiny figure seated on the top step of the stairs, a figure that sprang up joyfully as the beloved footstep came swiftly upwards and the beloved voice sounded through the darkness. The weather was bitterly cold now, and Douglas had—somewhat diffidently—requested Mrs. Dobbs to have a bright little fire burning all day in his draughty sitting-room. For Bee had had a cold lately, and he

had gently forbidden her to run up and down the still more draughty stairs. On this fire, Douglas every night and morning boiled the water in a tiny kettle, and made the tea himself, while his little sister looked on gravely, with a view to doing it herself when she should be a “little bigger.” How happy and contented the child was on these mornings and evenings! The days, to be sure, were long and dreary enough, even with the companionship of her doll and the kitten. But the evenings—when Douglas and she sat by the fire and told each other stories, or sometimes (rare treat!) roasted an apple, or played at wonderful and absorbing games—which ruthless bed-time interrupted all too soon—these evenings seemed to little Bee like Heaven.

One wild snowy night, a few days before Christmas, Douglas was much later in coming home than usual—indeed it was past seven when he ran up the worn, narrow steps of No. 13, Garth Street, and prepared to knock at the door. But to his surprise the door was open and the snow was drifting in.

He closed it, shook the clinging snow from his serge jacket and went upstairs.

No little voice and figure welcomed him. His slippers, as usual, lay warming in the fender ; but the fire had burnt low—and all was silent.

“Bee,” he called out cheerily. “Why—where are you, little woman ?”

No answer came, however ; and having looked into her room to make sure she was not there, he, supposing her to be with Mrs. Dobbs, made up the fire and went to his own room to wash his face and hands and brush his hair before tea. This done, he went back into the sitting-room. It looked strangely desolate, he thought, without the busy little figure.

When he had boiled the water and made the tea, and there was still no sign of “the little one,” he began to feel vaguely uneasy, and ran downstairs to the basement, where he found Mrs. Dobbs, looking crimsonly taciturn —for it had been washing-day. To the boy’s inquiries for his little sister, she curtly replied

that she had not seen the child since she—Mrs. Dobbs—took up the tea-things nearly two hours ago.

Douglas felt as if a cold hand had suddenly clutched his heart. Could she have gone out? Surely not. Then where could she be? None of the other lodgers had seen her, they replied to the boy's distracted questionings. She was in none of the rooms, high or low. She had disappeared.

In an agony of anxiety Douglas seized his cap, and rushed out into the street.

“Bee!—Bee!” he called aloud.

But the snowy wind caught his words and drowned them. He paused under a swirling gas-lamp—uncertain which way to turn, full of miserable, bewildered forebodings. Was everything to be taken from him? the poor boy thought fiercely and wretchedly. Was he to lose Bee too? He tore down the street, hardly knowing where he went, or what he was doing. The snow swept across his face, half blinding him; the wind carried his cap away into the darkness, but he paid no heed.

Suddenly a shrill little cry smote his ears. He stood still to listen. Swift pattering footsteps sounded on the almost deserted pavement, and the next minute a tiny, drenched, forlorn-looking figure flung itself upon him, shrieking sobbingly :

“ Douglas, Douglas ! Oh, Douglas—I’ve got you—I’ve got you ! ”

Douglas just stooped and lifted her up in his arms, and hurried silently back to the house. The passionate relief of feeling the dear little arms round his neck, of hearing the sweet baby-voice in his ears, was too great for speech. He felt he simply could not have uttered a word without bursting into tears.

“ Oh, Douglas ! ” Bee wept as she hugged him tighter and closer—“ I did think you were never coming back—and I went out to find you.”

Half an hour later, when the little culprit, warm and dry and beaming, and wrapped in a blanket, was enjoying her bread and milk while seated on Douglas’s knee, he said somewhat severely :

“Now, remember, Bee, if you ever go out alone at night again, I shall be very, very angry, and very likely won’t love you. I thought you were lost.”

“Well—I thought you was lost,” protested the child, with a piteous quiver of the lips.

“Boys never get lost,” was the calm answer. “And if I had been—do you suppose you could have found me, you silly little thing?”

“But I *did* find you!” was the triumphant answer.

“No, you didn’t. I came home and found no nice little sister waiting for me—and had to go out again in the snow and cold—all because you were a naughty girl.”

Upon this the truant wept, and promised, and was forgiven.

After tea she sat demurely upon a little stool, still wrapped up in the blanket, looking with earnest eyes and puckered forehead, into the fire. Then she said suddenly:

“Once I was lost another time, Douglas.”

“Oh, no, you weren’t, dear,” Douglas

answered absently. He was toiling through a tattered French grammar — and its idioms puzzled him, as they have puzzled older and wiser heads.

“ Yes,” went on the child, rising and coming towards him with the blanket trailing on the floor behind her — “ once I was lost another time — in the snow. But I can’t ‘member properly.”

She knitted her small brows again, and Douglas, suddenly recalling the incident of his father’s finding her, took her on his knee again. He had often wondered as to her birth and her real name, and had secretly made up his mind, long ago, that she was the lost daughter of some nobleman. He had never heard his mother say how the child was dressed on that memorable night, nor if she had on any necklace, or sleeve fasteners, or other of the ornaments which he vaguely supposed a lost babe of noble birth might wear. And to-night he resolved to do what, as yet, he had not been able to summon up courage to do — namely, to look over his dear

mother's desk, papers, etc. He might find some clue there.

“ Try to remember, Bee,” he said after a long pause, during which she had ruffled up his dark hair in loving fashion, and affectionately and carefully smoothed his thick dark eyebrows.

But Bee had lost the fleeting recollection.

“ Can't 'member,” she answered, wetting her tiny forefinger in an absorbed way, and continuing her attentions to his eyebrows. “ Too wee to 'member.”

When she had gone to bed, Douglas brought out his mother's desk, unlocked it, and then sat quite still for a long time. The faint sweet perfume that lingered among the letters and papers there brought his mother's image to his mind so sharply and vividly that he uttered a half-choked cry and hid his face in his hands. When at last with reverent fingers he lifted out the contents, his dark lashes were heavy with tears. First, came a bundle of letters—evidently much read—tied with a pale maize-coloured ribbon, bearing

the words “Charlie’s letters.” Douglas laid them gently aside. Then came various little note-books, another and larger note-book (which appeared to be a kind of diary) and the certificate of his own birth together with that of his mother’s marriage. There were a few loose letters, a bundle of receipts, one or two dry brown flowers wrapped carefully in tissue paper. And there was a piece of dark brown hair. Douglas knew it was his father’s. But there were no trinkets of any kind — nothing that might have belonged to little Bee.

At the very bottom of the desk lay a thick creamy envelope with an imposing blood-red crest. It was addressed in a bold peculiar hand to Mrs. Charles Conrath — and, after a moment’s hesitation, Douglas opened it.

It was dated shortly after Captain Conrath’s death, and ran thus:—

“MADAM,

“I have seen in this morning’s *Times* the announcement of the death of your

husband — and my only brother — Charles Conrath. As he was always a young fool in money-matters (and in many other ways) I suppose he has left you penniless. You will therefore, I imagine, resume the work from which your marriage with him emancipated you. I write to offer to take my brother's son from your care, when I shall do my best to give him the manners — as he shall have the education — of a gentleman. Pardon me if I make the express and rigid stipulation that all communication between you and him, personally or by letter, must henceforward cease. He will be dead to you, as you will be dead to him. Should you refuse to accede to these terms I shall wash my hands of the lad and his prospects now and for ever. I shall send for him on Thursday morning.

“ I remain,

“ Madam,

“ Yours truly,

“ EVAN V. CONRATH.”

Douglas sat gazing at this cruel epistle as if

fascinated. He read it again, and yet again. His boyish soul rose in hot revolt at the deliberately insulting words ; his whole being quivered with fierce resentment. Could the writer of that letter be the brother of his tender-hearted, sweet-natured father ? the boy wondered passionately. He sprang to his feet, pushed aside his chair, and paced with quick, uneven steps up and down the little room. Wild projects of compelling fame and fortune whirled through his excited brain. He saw himself wealthy, famous, world-renowned, despising the overtures — nay, refusing the acquaintanceship — of Evan Conrath and all his tribe. He saw himself looking back upon this night as the turning-point in his life. He saw — ah, me ! he saw the visions we have all seen *once !* — visions that for the most part fade and die like the “baseless fabrics” they are.

How this giddy height of satisfied ambition was to be attained, was to him as yet a dim and hazy cloud of meteoric, half-shaped ideas and projects. But with health and youth and

grim determination surely all things would be easy ; he would prove to this arrogant, heartless kinsman of his that “the manners and education of a gentleman” might be attainable without his assistance. Evan Conrath should yet be proud of the nephew he had so gratuitously washed his hands of. And so on, and so on.

Then, all too soon, came the inevitable reaction. How was he—a struggling, poverty-stricken office-boy, with no likelihood of any future situation more lucrative than some miserable clerkship at a hundred, or at most a hundred and fifty pounds a year—how was it possible for him to rise above mediocrity ? It was *not* possible.

He flung himself into his chair again, and sat staring moodily at the fast-blackening fire. How dreary and sordid it looked ! How dreary and sordid the whole room looked in the dim half-light shed by the guttering candle ! Dreariness and sordidness and obscurity — poverty - stricken obscurity — that was to be his life, his and Bee’s, until they

were old — until they died. A wave of inexpressible desolation swept over him—a leaden weight of that intolerable depression with which we have all, or most of us, at some time or other been familiar ; which at the time seems so never-ending, so hopeless, under the influence of which thousands of men, and women too, have committed suicide, not realizing that it is a state of mind partly due to physical causes acting, it may be—or may not—on some mental disturbance, and may lift in a day or an hour, independent of surrounding circumstances.

“Big Ben’s” deep voice boomed out the hour of midnight. That sounded dreary too, the boy thought listlessly—like a knell. In the weird hush that followed he could hear the soft sweep of the snow against the windows, and the subdued wailing murmur of the wind. With a heavy sigh he roused himself, and mechanically replaced the things in his mother’s desk, locked it, and put it away. Then he laid his head down on his arms and sobbed bitterly. He was not a sen-

timental lad, nor easily moved to tears ; but just then he longed, with a wild, impotent longing that would not be silenced, for the voice, the touch, the loving smile of his dead mother.

The cold embers in the grate fell with a crash, the wick of the candle grew long and ragged, strange shadows flickered on the walls, and from the doorway of the inner room a small white figure glided out and stood at the boy's elbow. She did not ask why he wept ; she did not speak at all ; she simply climbed upon his knee, put her little arms round his neck, and laid her soft face, warm and rosy from sleep, caressingly against his, murmuring to him the while in an inarticulate, crooning way, to show her sympathy.

Somehow she comforted him ; the bitterness was lightened somewhat ; his heart and hopes rose again. He felt a curious sense of companionship in the clinging clasp of her arms, the light touch of her baby lips, as he had felt once before on that sad day when

his mother was buried. His heavy sobs ceased, and Bee took out his handkerchief and gently dried his eyes. Then she whispered :

“ Bee loves you. Bee will always be good, and be a little housekeeper. Bee will be the very same as mammy.”

She had a funny little way sometimes of speaking of herself in the third person. Douglas liked to hear it. He kissed the curly head and murmured gently :

“ Dear little thing—dear little child.”

Then, fearful lest she should take cold, he carried her to bed and sat beside her until she fell asleep. His depression had gone ; he felt strong again, and once more capable of defying the world, though in less tempestuous fashion.

A solitary star shone into the room ; its pure, pale light seemed to beckon him away from despair and failure. Some words of Longfellow’s floated through his mind — hackneyed words enough, but they held a strange insistent significance for him just

then. (And after all it is the hackneyed words that are sweetest and truest—else why *are* they hackneyed? Favourite paths are most footworn.) He repeated them softly under his breath :

“ Oh star of strength ! I see thee stand
 And smile upon my pain ;
Thou beckonest with thy mailed hand,
 And I am strong again.

The star of the unconquered will,
 He rises in my breast,
Serene and resolute and still
 And calm and self-possessed.”

He could not remember any more ; but he said these two verses over and over again with a growing sense of self-reliance and hope. When at last he went to bed, he lay awake until far into the morning, and his resolves took shape and form, and became tangible, living things. When towards dawn he fell asleep, he had a strangely vivid dream.

He thought he stood with little Bee in a dark dreary valley where no sunbeam could penetrate, and where the waves of a black, sullen-looking lake washed their very feet. The

tide seemed to swell every moment ; a melancholy wind shivered and moaned over its surface. The space where they stood grew smaller and more insecure. There seemed no way of escape. Behind them, the rapidly-advancing flood ; before them, a sheer frowning cliff, whose top seemed almost in the clouds. Its hard, cruel surface held no faintest semblance of a path ; not even a bush could be seen as a possible friendly foothold. But far, far up—away in the distance near the sky—was one tiny green spot where the sun shone. Douglas looked round him wildly and despairingly. It seemed to grow darker in the valley ; a cold rain had begun to fall. Bee seemed to be unaware of their danger. She was sitting with her little old doll clasped to her breast, humming a contented, wordless song. The water covered her tiny feet, but she only laughed delightedly. Soon it covered Douglas's feet too. He stooped and lifted Bee in his arms, and she curled round his neck, whispering foolish, caressing baby talk in his ears. Then all at once he saw

that the face of the rock was not so smooth as he had at first imagined. Here and there, immediately above him, little narrow pointed ledges ran out ; further up they seemed less narrow and shelving. But ah!—the space was far between them ; and how was it possible that he could gain even these nearest to him, with Bee in his arms ?

The water came up to his knees.

He set his teeth, and bidding the child cling firmly to his neck, swung himself slowly and painfully to the lowest ledge. But he might not rest there. The next ledge was gained, and then the next. He stopped to take breath, flinging his arm round a sharp projecting peak to steady himself. His heart leapt into his mouth then, for Bee's hands suddenly slipped from his neck, and it was only by the quick, convulsive clasp of his left arm that he saved her from falling into the inky waters below. Then he toiled on. Another ledge was gained ; but the next seemed to afford no hold for his stiff and bleeding fingers. He held the child to his heart, and

trembling in every limb leaned panting against the face of the cliff. The wind had risen ; its strong blast seemed to choke him. They were far above the lake now, but he dared not look down, his head felt so light and giddy. Suddenly he became conscious that his arms were empty. Little Bee was gone. Far above him he heard her voice in shrieks of baby glee. With a superhuman effort he caught the slippery ledge and swung himself upward, then caught at a higher ledge still. On, on, with an ease and steadiness that surprised himself even in his dream, until he reached a rough shelving plain, which had been invisible from the valley below. Great rocks met him at every turn, but he climbed over them, climbed round them, passed them somehow. Now he found himself on the brink of a wide, yawning, impassable chasm, on the other side of which shone the far-away sunshine. He could still hear Bee's laughter, but only faintly. With a heavy heart, but undiminished purpose, he climbed down the ghastly precipice. The descent was long and painful, but he

reached the bottom at last, and began the ascent of the other side. Half-way up he slipped and nearly fell, but a strong invisible hand caught his, and led him onwards and upwards, a clear, ringing voice cried out triumphantly :

“ *To conquer fame and fortune!* ”

With the words still beating through his brain he awoke and sprang from his bed. It was morning, and the winter sun was shining into the room.



CHAPTER III.

T H E U N F O R E S E E N .

“ Two terrors fright my soul by night and day :
The first is Life, and with her comes the years ;
A weary, winding train of maidens they,
With forward-fronting eyes too sad for tears ;
Upon whose kindred faces, blank and grey
The shadow of a kindred woe appears.
Death is the second terror ; who shall say
What form beneath the shrouding mantle nears ?
Which way she turn, my soul finds no relief,
My smitten soul may not be comforted ;
Alternately she swings from grief to grief,
And poised between them, sways from dread to dread.
For there she dreads because she knows ; and here
Because she knows not, inly faints with fear.”

BEE was decidedly cross this morning. Her little face, usually so bright and sunshiny, was clouded ; her voice was fretful and full of tears. She cried outright when her bread and milk burnt her tongue. She cried again when Douglas playfully pulled her curls — cried because she knocked her elbow against the

table ; cried more than ever because it rained, and Douglas said she must not stand upon the doorstep to see him off. She tearfully insisted ; and then Douglas assumed the stern, elder-brotherly tone which he kept only for rare occasions. But Bee rebelled.

“ *Will go! Will go!* ” she screamed passionately. And then—oh, sad to relate!—she slapped her brother with all her tiny might, and rushing into her little room, threw herself on the bed, and shrieked and shook with rage.

Douglas vainly tried to pacify her ; but the child took no notice ; and as he was already late, he went off and left her sitting weeping and unrepentant on the floor.

When he came home at night, he found her waiting as usual at the head of the stairs. As he came up she flung her small body upon him and cried sobbingly :

“ Oh, Douglas — Bee was very naughty. Can you never love Bee any more ? ”

“ Are you good now ? ” he said, stooping to kiss her.

“Yes—quite, *quite* good”—burrowing her little head under his arm. “But Bee has *such* a headache.”

“That’s with crying so much this morning,” he answered.

But he looked at her anxiously; for her face was unnaturally flushed, her eyes heavy, and her hands burning hot.

She would not eat anything at tea-time. It hurt her throat, she said. And all the rest of the evening she sat curled up on Douglas’s knee, leaning her hot little head against his shoulder, her usually busy tongue strangely silent.

“What a quiet little woman it is to-night,” he said at last, smoothing her hair tenderly.

“Want to go to bed,” was the querulous answer. “Legs ache.” And the ready tears coursed down her cheeks again.

A sharp fear sprang to life in Douglas’s heart. Was the child going to be ill?—perhaps to die. Was *everything* going to be taken from him?

He put her to bed, and watched beside her

until she went to sleep. He himself slept that night on the sofa in the sitting-room. But he did not undress ; he felt too anxious. All night Bee tossed and turned, and moaned in her sleep, and towards morning became very ill. Mrs. Dobbs, whom Douglas called as soon as he heard her astir, “ hoped to goodness ” it might not be scarlet fever.

At the very mention of that dread scourge, the boy’s face grew pale. There had been two cases at the lower end of the street, he knew.

“ Do you think it looks like scarlet fever ? ” he asked hurriedly.

“ Well, Master Conrath, which I can only say by my own sister’s child, as sweet a little boy as ever could be—which was took in the self-same way, and no notice taken, thinking it just a cold, and dead and stiff in the inside of five days—which broke ’is mother’s ’eart, and never smiled to speak of since. I should *hadvise* the doctor, Master Conrath—not that they know much when all’s said and done, but takes a load off the mind in illness, which

of course they're paid for." Here Mrs. Dobbs stopped for breath, and laid her hand on her heart with a mournful sigh.

Douglas hurried off at once, and was fortunate in finding the doctor at home.

It was not scarlet fever, the latter said, when he had taken a brief survey of his little patient; but it was a kind of low lingering fever, which might hang about her for an indefinite time.

"There have been several cases of it in the neighbourhood," went on Dr. Glossop, pursing out his lips as he replaced his watch in his pocket.

"Is it—is it dangerous?" asked the boy unsteadily.

"Well—er—one or two cases have ended fatally," was the answer, after a pause. "But I hope, with proper care—— By the way, who is to nurse her? I don't suppose your landlady will have either the time or the wish—or the capability for that matter. You had better get some respectable woman——"

But Douglas interrupted him.

“I shall nurse her,” he said shortly. “If there is anything I can’t do, I daresay Mrs. Dobbs will help me. She is a kind-hearted woman enough, and my little sister is fond of her.”

“But — you have to be out all day, I understand,” said the doctor, bending his keen grey eyes on the resolute young face beside him.

“I shall arrange that,” was the quiet answer.

“Well, well — I shall send round the medicine, and look in again this evening. It is a pity she is in that little box of a room. Is there no other they can let her have ?”

“Mine is larger,” the boy answered. “But it is awfully cold and draughty. At least, for her it would be. But this room is generally pretty comfortable. We might have her bed moved in here.”

“It’s more airy, certainly,” assented Dr. Glossop. “Yes, that might do. Let it be done at once.”

Bee was pleased for a time by the change,

and tried to smile ; but presently she began to cry because her throat hurt her so, she said. When they were left alone again, Douglas took her in his arms with soothing tender words, and she buried her head in his neck, where after sobbing wearily for nearly an hour, she fell into an uneasy sleep. When he had laid her down again, Douglas sat for some time leaning his head on his hand, in anxious harassed thought. If he remained at home to nurse Bee, what would become of his duties at the office ? It was hardly likely that his employers would keep his situation open for him for any length of time ; even if they did, they certainly would not pay his salary. And how could he procure the nourishing food Bee would require, and meet all the expenses incidental to illness, with nothing coming in ?

“ God knows it was hard enough before to keep things going,” he muttered. “ What on earth am I to do ? ”

Presently he rose and went in search of Mrs. Dobbs ; for he wanted her to remain

with Bee for half-an-hour while he went along to Little Queen Street to explain matters to Mr. Debenham (who, by the way, was the senior partner). Mrs. Dobbs consented after some little demur ; for, as she expressed it, she was “that busy she didn’t know which way to turn.”

Douglas set off at a sharp run, and arrived at his destination considerably out of breath. As it happened Mr. Debenham was not there. Mr. Carslake was there, however ; and, unfortunately, he was in a very bad temper. He had not been in bed all night, and had lost considerably more money at cards than he could afford. Further, he had partaken freely of very doubtful champagne, and, in consequence, had a splitting headache. So, in the first place, he reprimanded Douglas sharply for his tardy appearance, and in the second place told him not too mildly that if there was any question of his not attending to his duties as usual, he had better give up his situation altogether.

The hot blood rushed to the boy’s face and

receded again, leaving it deadly pale. He opened his lips to speak, then closed them again, and turned his eyes half-imploringly, half-defiantly, to Mr. Carslake's. That gentleman was sitting sideways in an arm-chair, with one leg thrown carelessly over the arm thereof. In one hand he held a cigar, which, apparently, he had not yet had the energy to light; in the other he held an open letter.

He was a sandy-haired, pale-eyed youth, thin and lanky. He spoke with a lisp, and dressed in the extreme of the prevailing fashion.

“ You mean,” Douglas said slowly after a minute, “ that you dismiss me—that I need not come back again ? ”

“ That is just exactly what I mean,” was the sharp answer. “ So be off, and shut the door. There's a most infernal draught coming in.”

But the lad stood still.

“ I should like to wait to see Mr. Debenham,” he said, speaking very low and steadily.

Mr. Carslake rose to his feet with violence.

“ Confound you ! you cheeky young beggar ! ” he exclaimed. “ Do you think my

authority is not enough for your dismissal? Take yourself off at once. Do you hear? What are you waiting for? You had your week's wages the day before yesterday. You don't expect to be paid for one day's service, I should hope." And here followed some forcible language, which, as it happened, fell upon the empty air, for the boy was gone. Mr. Carslake threw himself into his chair again, and forgot all about the matter in less than two minutes—having a good deal to think of that morning.

Douglas went slowly downstairs, and out into the street, where the bright winter sun was shining merrily upon the half-melted snow which had fallen the night before. A dazed sense of unreality possessed him. He tried to make himself understand that he had lost his situation—that he had no hope of another—that if he had he could not leave Bee—that he had to face the prospect of finding himself utterly penniless in a very few days. But as yet the conviction conveyed no special meaning to his brain. He only felt a

dull throbbing of head and heart—as though they were only half-awakened to pain. He noticed in a mechanical kind of way many things in the busy streets of which on other days he was altogether unconscious. The ever-shifting, hurrying crowds of horses and carriages, of drays and omnibuses, of men and women and children, of sad faces and merry ones, all seemed photographed on his brain with a curiously vivid distinctness. He noted the sharp brilliance of the snow-wreathed Houses of Parliament against the pale softness of the December sky. He was intensely aware of the cries of the street vendors, the clang and roll of wheels and horses' feet on the fast freezing roadways. He felt like the spectator of some monotonous yet life-like panorama. But as he neared Garth Street this sense of apathy left him, and gave place to a sharp raging anxiety. *What was he to do ?* What would become of him and of Bee ? He saw nothing but black despair whichever way he looked.

Bee was moaning feverishly when he went

in. Mrs. Dobbs was not with her, and Douglas felt a sudden unreasoning anger as he heard the child asking, with the piteous insistence of an oft-repeated request, for "just a little drink of water." Then he remembered that Mrs. Dobbs had all her own manifold duties to attend to — and that nursing is not included in the duties of a landlady. So with the smile he always kept for Bee, he held the tumbler to her lips, and smoothed and turned her hot tumbled pillow. Then he sat beside her, talking to her and patiently beginning story after story (only to be told crossly that "that was not a nice one") until Mrs. Dobbs came up with a basin of soup—which the small invalid refused with many tears. Douglas forgot that he had not had his own dinner, for Bee was restless and fretful, and insisted upon his sitting close beside her that she might hold his hand.

And so the day wore on.

Snow fell heavily in the afternoon, and night came on early. Bee began to wander, crying piteously for "Douglas"—"Douglas"

—and pushing him away impatiently when he whispered that he was beside her and that he would never leave her.

It was quite dark ; the candle was lighted and the snowy night shut out, when Dr. Glossop came, looked at Bee's flushed face and shining eyes, shook his head, and after asking a few questions and leaving a few directions, hurried away again.

After all, how little we can do—with all our science and all our discoveries—against these insidious relentless foes, disease and death ! Little more than “pour drugs of which we know little, into bodies of which we know less !”

As Douglas sat through the long winter night listening to the sobbing wind, and counting the hours which Big Ben's deep voice rolled solemnly out over Westminster, it seemed to him that Bee was already doomed, that nothing could save her.

There are times when nothing but sorrow seems possible, because of the waves of sorrow that have gone before.

The boy's loving, protective nature, hungry and unsatisfied in the loss of his mother, had wrapped itself almost fiercely round the one thing left him—his little sister. He always thought of her as his sister, and no sister could have been dearer. And he was just in the nervous, half-morbid mood to dread that because he could not face life again without her, she would be taken from him.

The long dreary night, with its ever-pressing sense of weariness kept at bay by sharp anxiety, stole away and gave place to morning, and morning again wore into night. And so the days went on until a week had passed—a week that insensibly melted into a fortnight. Gradually the fever abated, and Bee began to grow stronger day by day. Dr. Glossop came but seldom now, and when he did his plain, rugged face always wore a cheerful smile. He was a warm-hearted little man, a bachelor, and, if anything, preferred his poor patients to his richer ones. An impression prevailed in the neighbourhood that he was possessed of a comfortable independent

fortune, though, as a matter of fact, he was not particularly well off, and gave away a good deal more than he could afford.

One afternoon, about a fortnight after Christmas—such a sad, wretched Christmas it had been!—Douglas had wrapped Bee in a shawl, and allowed her to sit up for a little time upon his knee. They had had a brief battle over a cup of beef-tea, which the child said was “nasty,” and Douglas represented was to make her strong and well again, so that she might once more be his “little housekeeper.”

“It makes me tired to take it, Douglas dear,” she murmured plaintively.

“Oh no, little one,” he said, stroking her head, from which all the bright curls had been cut away; “you only think so because you don’t want to take it.”

“Perhaps,” assented the child wearily, as she swallowed another spoonful. “Why does it make people more tired to do things they don’t want to do than things they do?” she added somewhat ambiguously.

“ I don’t know, little one,” was the sober answer.

“ Do you feel that way too, Douglas?”

“ Yes, dear, often. Now just one more spoonful, and then I think you must lie down again.”

When he had put her into bed, he mended the fire and instituted a search for the dirty old doll which only came second to himself in Bee’s heart. Then he moved the table with his writing close to the bedside. For he had got some more copying work within the last few days, and poorly paid though it was, it was all he had to depend upon now, and he worked at it every spare moment. It would be finished to-day, however, and he had no prospect of more in the meantime.

A bitter sense of injustice was fast warping the boy’s nature. He was willing to work hard and constantly—to do without everything save the barest necessaries ; he had doggedly set his mind to conquer the adverse fate that threatened him. But of what use was it ? Everything seemed to be against

him. All life seemed set in a minor, wailing key. What he had to look forward to was the prospect of Bee weak and ailing always, and pining for want of the comforts he could not give her—of watching her fade away from him at last, not from disease, but from sheer starvation. He was worn out, too, by these weeks of nursing and anxiety, therefore an easier prey than usual to despondency.

For the first time he thought seriously of disregarding his promise to his mother and breaking his own pride by applying to his uncle, Evan Conrath. But some strange pre-science warned him that only refusal and insult awaited him in that quarter.

He thought these feverish thoughts independently of his writing, which he did, to a certain extent, mechanically.

As he finished the last page, he raised his head and met the grave, earnest look of Bee's soft grey eyes, which had been watching him intently and silently for the last half-hour.

“Douglas, why do you always look so sorry?” she said in her weak little voice.

“Is it because I am in bed, or because mammy is away?”

Douglas did not answer. He was leaning his elbow on the table, staring into the fire.

“Am I going away like mammy did?” Bee went wistfully on after a minute.

“My little Bee, I hope not,” was the unsteady answer.

“If I do,” pursued the child—“if I *have* to go away and be in Heaven where mammy is, do you suppose God would let me be a little housekeeper to mammy until you come?”

“Don’t say things like that, little one,” was the indistinct answer.

“Or perhaps I would have to be a housekeeper to one of the angels,” observed Bee thoughtfully. “But I daresay He’ll let me stay with you,” she added in a consoling little murmur. “You see, you need me more than the angels do, and mammy has got father.”

Douglas drew the close-cropped little head within his arm without speaking.

There was a long silence after that. The

dusk deepened ; the firelight danced coquettishly on the walls.

Suddenly Mrs. Dobbs put her head in at the door.

“ There’s a gentleman downstairs wants to see you, Master Conrath,” she said somewhat resentfully, for she was far from thin, and the stairs were steep and long. “ I told him to come up, but he said as how I was to come and tell you.”

And Mrs. Dobbs (who like most people had her days of gloom and bad temper, of which this was one) shut the door with a bang, and flounced heavily downstairs again.

Douglas followed her, and found a tall young man standing in the grimy, draughty passage, whom, to his surprise, he recognised as Mr. Debenham.

“ How are you, Conrath ? ” said this gentleman in a pleasant, languid voice. “ I came to have a little talk with you. I only got back to town this morning, and Mr. Carslake told me you had left. Your little sister is ill, I am sorry to hear.”

“Yes, she has been very ill, but she is getting better, thank you. I’m afraid,” he added hesitatingly, “I can hardly ask you to come upstairs. Her bed has been moved into the sitting-room, and it is not——” He paused, and his face flushed somewhat.

But Debenham answered courteously :

“If you and she have no objections, I should like to see your little sister. I have brought a few grapes for her.”

His eyes looked so kindly as he spoke that Douglas hesitated no longer, and preceded his visitor up the long dark stairs until they reached the attics.

In spite of the scanty furniture and the uncarpeted floor, the room looked clean and home-like. The fire shone pleasantly on the whitewashed walls, on Captain Conrath’s sword and spurs, and on Bee’s pale baby face, with its aureole of short feathery hair. She smiled when Mr. Debenham spoke to her, and opened her mouth obediently for him to pop a grape into it. He laid the cool tempting-looking bunch on the coverlet, and

stroked her hair with a strangely tender look in his eyes. Then he sighed a little, and sat down without speaking. He had a quiet, dark face, with tired, rather sad-looking, grey eyes, and a kind, well-shaped mouth. He sat quite silent for some time, pulling his moustache thoughtfully, while Douglas drew down the blind and lit the candle. Then he roused himself, and said abruptly :

“ Your little sister reminds me very much of a child sister of my own, who died long ago. How old is she ? ”

“ She is nearly seven,” Douglas answered after a moment’s hesitation.

“ Seven in June,” put in Bee’s voice.

Mr. Debenham looked surprised.

“ I should have thought her older than that,” he said thoughtfully. “ My little sister was nearly ten.” Then he added in his usual languid tone, “ By the way, Conrath, I have arranged with Mr. Carslake that your place is to be kept open for you. I don’t care to have strange lads about the place, and you have got into our ways. In

short, I don't want to part with you if I can help it. I have told Forbes to take your duties for the next week or two. And as for your salary, that—er—will be all right, you know. I shall see that you get it weekly as usual."

The colour rushed to young Conrath's face. He rose to his feet, and uttered a few broken, half-articulate words. Then he sat down again, and just laid his head down on Bee's pillow, his heart too full for speech. But in a few moments he had recovered himself, and his eyes met Mr. Debenham's with a look in them that thanked the other better than any mere words could have done. It was a look of intense, almost passionate gratitude and relief. Presently he said in a very low voice :

"I cannot tell you how grateful I am, Mr. Debenham. You don't know what it—means to me."

But Debenham, with a comprehending nod, had turned to speak to little Bee, who was watching him furtively and approvingly from beneath her long lashes.

“Was your little sister the very same size as me?” she asked gravely, when she had answered his kindly questions in her quaint old-fashioned way.

“Yes, I think so,” he made answer.

“Has she gone to Heaven?” she continued, fixing her great grey eyes on his. Then as he did not speak, she added, with a quivering lip, “My mammy went to Heaven. She will never come back, Douglas says, and I want her so dreadfully.” And she burst into a fit of passionate crying.

With a troubled look on his kind face, Debenham rose to go; but as he held out his hand to Douglas Bee sobbed out:

“No, no; don’t want you to go away. You have a nice face, and Bee wants to hear about that little sister that’s in Heaven.”

The young man good-naturedly enough sat down again, and Bee, having dried her tears upon Douglas’s handkerchief, subjected the visitor to a searching examination upon his life and habits in general—past, present and future. He, evidently amused, answered

with edifying gravity, and found himself to his surprise exerting himself to be agreeable in a way which would have surprised considerably most of his acquaintances, who only knew him as a rather haughty and not at all communicative young man.

When Bee had ascertained, by careful and minute inquiry, that Mr. Debenham had no more little sisters, no brothers, no babies of his own, and no immediate prospect of nor desire for any, that he had once possessed a horse, but never, to his recollection, a kitten, with other equally important information, she announced with a contented little sigh :

“I like you. You are funny and nice, and your face looks kind when you laugh. I hope you’ll have some nice little babies of your own quite soon.”

Then, without further remark, she coiled herself up and fell fast asleep.

Debenham remained for some time longer, talking in a low voice to Douglas, and encouraging him to speak freely of his perplexities and troubles and aspirations. The lad

interested him more than ever. He felt a vague regret that he was not rich enough to be a small Providence to him by “giving him a start” in some line where his abilities would find scope and appreciation.

We are prone, you know, to indulge philanthropic intentions regarding our fellow-men—when we know our circumstances forbid our carrying them out. Too often, I fear, we find that when our circumstances change our ideas are apt to change also. We find that “charity begins at home,” that “we really do not feel that we are called upon,” that “there are other claims upon us,” etc., etc. In short, that a thousand obstacles stand between us and the good we would but may not do.

To do Ralph Debenham all justice, however, he never lost an opportunity of doing his fellow-creatures a good turn—provided he hadn’t to exert himself much personally. But upon this occasion he really had exerted himself. He could hardly have told what had impelled him to penetrate the hitherto un-

known region of Garth Street on this bitter winter afternoon (it was an afternoon, too, for which he had several congenial engagements) to pay a visit to his senior office boy and his little sick sister. It was an entirely unprecedented thing for him to do. He had wondered at himself lazily as he stood on the bleak doorstep. He had wondered at himself still more as he climbed the dark and unsavoury staircase leading to young Conrath's poorly-furnished attic. But he wondered less as he talked to the lad—talked almost as he might have talked to a younger brother of his own—and found what clear intelligence and power of reasoning the young fellow had, what deeply-rooted ambition and latent indomitable will.

“And, by Jove!” he said to himself, as he walked down Garth Street half-an-hour later in the illusive hope of finding a hansom, “he’s a thorough-bred young fellow, as well as a clever one. Conrath—Conrath,” he mused; “the name seems familiar to me somehow.”

He half resolved to raise his protégé to a

more responsible and therefore more lucrative position in the office ; for, as I have said, he was the senior partner, and had more to say on matters connected with the firm than Carslake, who, by the way, rather disliked young Conrath, and snubbed him whenever an opportunity offered.

After that afternoon, Debenham often “looked in,” as he put it, at Garth Street, always bringing some little gift of toys, or fruit, or sweetmeats for Bee, and listening in his lazy, good-natured way to her innocent chatter, which amused him immensely. He had long talks with Douglas, too, and got to know the boy thoroughly—aye, and to respect him.

As the days went on, the small invalid gradually gained strength, and looked almost her own bonnie, winsome self again. She eagerly insisted upon taking up her self-imposed “housekeeping” duties ; and Douglas soon felt safe in leaving her alone as he used to do.

Thus life to these two Garth Street waifs looked bright and possible once more.

CHAPTER IV.

SAIONARA !

“ The same old baffling questions ! O, my friend,
I cannot answer them. In vain I send
My soul into the dark, where never burn
The lamps of science, nor the natural light
Of Reason’s sun and stars ! I cannot learn
Their great and solemn meanings, nor discern
The awful secrets of the eyes which turn
Evermore on us through the day and night
With silent challenge, and a dumb demand,
Proffering the riddles of the dread unknown,
Like the calm sphinxes with their eyes of stone,
Questioning the centuries from their veils of sand !
I have no answer for myself or thee,
Save that I learned beside my mother’s knee,
‘ All is of God that is, and is to be ;
And God is good.’ Let this suffice us still,
Resting in childlike trust upon His will
Who moves to His great ends unthwarted by the ill ! ”

—WHITTIER.

A YEAR had passed, an uneventful year, as far as Bee and Douglas were concerned. He had grown taller and somewhat thinner ; all the

boyishness had gone from his face, leaving it graver and more thoughtful than such a young face ought to be. There was an almost stern look about the eyes and lips at times which sat there strangely enough. And in his heart the seed of ambition which had sprung to restless life on the night when he read his uncle's letter waxed stronger and lustier every day.

Bee, too, had grown taller, her features were sharper ; she was, perhaps, hardly so pretty as she had been a year ago, but it was a very sweet little face, and the eyes and the expression were both beautiful.

It was a lonely life they led, and yet it had its pleasures too — pleasures that to most people would have seemed trivial and bare enough. Sundays were Bee's red-letter days, always ; for on Sundays Douglas was with her all day, and she could pet him and hang about him to her heart's content. She was a lovingly demonstrative little creature, and Douglas, naturally, was her hero and ideal of perfection. His love for her, though deeper,

was less demonstrative, and took the form of a constant thoughtful care and uniform tenderness, with an occasional silent caress, or still rarer kiss. These kisses Bee prized very highly. It was touching to see how the young fellow tried to do his best to let his love fill the place of the mother-love the little one had lost ; how careful he was of her health, how anxious to brighten her lonely childhood, and to compensate her for long solitary hours when he had to be away from her. He managed generally to run home for a minute or two during his dinner-hour, just to see that she was all right, but he felt sadly conscious that she was far too much alone. And yet—what could he do ?

Her clothing, too, worried him secretly. For she was still wearing the clumsily-made black frock Mrs. Dobbs had got for her more than a year ago ; it was not only woefully shabby now, but far above her knees, and Douglas made up his mind that she must have a new one. He had a vague idea also that most of her other clothes wanted renew-

ing as well, and he hadn't the slightest idea how to set about it. He shrank from sending the child out with Mrs. Dobbs ; for a long course of troubles and misfortunes had driven that good woman to seek consolation in the daily — indeed, hourly — consumption of a beverage which she vaguely alluded to as “unsweetened,” and as this beverage affected not only her temper but her judgment and her actions as well, she was not at all times either a pleasant or a reliable companion. Douglas used to lie awake at nights, thinking the matter over, and finally came to the conclusion that he would seize an early morning hour, when Mrs. Dobbs might perchance be more consecutive in her ideas than was likely later in the day, and make out a list from her dictation as to what the child really required, and the probable maximum cost thereof. This — after one or two attempts rendered futile by Mr. Dobbs's launching out into mournful reminiscences of palmier days ere “Dobbs” had left his country at that country's expense — was at length accom-

plished, and one fine Saturday afternoon Douglas and his little charge set off in search of a much-advertised outfitting establishment in the “far east.”

They were quite a jovial pair that day. To be sure, Douglas had considerably less money to spend than his generous heart could have wished. But he had long ago learned to “cut his coat according to his cloth,” and had even essayed the herculean task of cutting without any cloth at all. And, after all, he was only a lad, despite his cares and responsibilities ; the sky was blue ; the sun was shining ; and he was going to spend money on the creature he loved best in all the world. So he felt comparatively joyous and light-hearted.

As for Bee, she danced along in the sunshine, holding Douglas’s hand tightly and proudly, and talking literally without cessation all the way. It was nothing to her that the little cap that rested upon her sunny hair was rusty and shabby, that her frock was brief to oddity, and that her cloak was well-

fitted to bear her other garments company. At least, it had been nothing to her until that morning, when Douglas had told her he was going to replace these shabby garments by new ones. Then her baby-eyes had twinkled with anticipation and excitement. They were twinkling now. What woman-child from its very cradle is insensible to the joys of something new to wear?

It was a long time since Bee had been out, for the weather had been cold, wet, and boisterous, and she had had a slight cold. Thus everything she saw to-day delighted her.

She insisted on Douglas lifting her up to watch the steamers and coal barges plying to and fro under Westminster Bridge. The sun shone on the water, and transformed the rippling, dirty wavelets into dull broken gold. Bee stretched out her arms to the dancing brightness lovingly. She almost wept to see the limp body of a drowned cat swept down the river's broad bosom. She screamed with ecstatic laughter at one or two adventurous

youths who had chosen Father Thames as the field of a watery race. She held her breath with excitement to watch the funnels of the steamers bend, as though by some invisible spirit agency, as they passed under the arches. At last Douglas, with some difficulty, persuaded her to leave this thrilling scene, and she trotted on again, along the Embankment, past Blackfriars Railway Station, through the busy, roaring vortex of Ludgate Hill, and thence into the labyrinth of London east of St. Paul's.

Their final destination was reached at last, and then the great business of the day began. It was an amusing, and yet perhaps a somewhat pathetic sight, to see the perplexed earnestness with which Douglas made his purchases, trying to reconcile what his taste approved with what his purse could afford. He felt very much at sea, and longed forlornly for some feminine assistance. But there was no shadow of care in the unsubdued glee with which little Bee gazed at her small person in the tall mirrors, as various “ ready-

made" frocks were tried on—then cloaks, and finally, hats. It went to the boy's heart that he could not buy one of the various rich and elegant little costumes which lay or hung about everywhere ; but he turned away from the "what might be" to the "what was," and stoically chose an inexpensive, but neatly-made brown frock and cloak, and a soft little brown tweed cap to match.

"Can't I put them all on now, Douglas?" Bee whispered excitedly. "Oh, Douglas, *do* let me put them on now."

"No, Bee, not just now. Come along, darling ; we have other things to get, you know."

With a sigh the little one acquiesced, and Douglas proceeded to examine the list he held. It puzzled him not a little, and he knitted his brows in dire perplexity.

The saleswoman of the department where they then were (a cheery-faced little woman with grey curly hair) seemed to divine his difficulty, and said pleasantly :

"Is there anything else, sir, do you think ?

If you should want any underclothing for the little miss, I could perhaps select for you, if you will tell me what prices I may go to.”

With an expression of relief, and a few courteous words of thanks, he handed her the paper, and after some time all the purchases were made, even to a stout little pair of shoes.

To Bee’s disappointment, Douglas ordered the parcel to be sent home, and they sallied forth into the busy streets again. By this time it was half-past five, and Douglas, seeing the little one’s wistful though silent glance at the window of an aërated bread shop, led her in, and committed the final extravagance of ordering tea and cakes for two, thereby delighting Bee’s small soul. They had a little marble table all to themselves, from which she could hardly be persuaded to tear herself away.

When they came out it was almost dark, and the lamps were lighted. Douglas hailed a passing omnibus, which took them to Charing Cross ; and from thence they walked down Whitehall, and so home.

“ Douglas, don’t you wish you could go in

an omnibus every day?" Bee said gleefully, as she pranced along Garth Street at her brother's side. "I never was in one before. When you are quite a man and I am quite tall with long dresses—then shall we go in an omnibus every day?"

Douglas laughed a little.

"Perhaps we shall be rich enough to drive in a hansom by that time, Bee."

"One of those nice little carriages where the man sits up at the back, and holds the reins over the top?" queried the child excitedly. "Oh! Douglas—*shall* we? Does Mr. Debenham drive in one?"

"Yes—often."

"Douglas, why does he never come now?"

"I don't know. Busy, perhaps."

"He hasn't come for ever such a long time," went on Bee, as she climbed the doorstep of No. 13—"not since long, long before Christmas. And the last time he didn't laugh—not once. And his face was quite sorry and tired, like yours used to be when I was ill in bed."

As a matter of fact there were good enough reasons for Mr. Debenham's face looking "sorry and tired." The firm of Debenham and Carslake, never a very prosperous concern, had of late been less so than ever, and the occasions were not few when both partners found themselves unpleasantly short of both ready money and credit. Debenham had other causes of worry besides, and the combined strain affected even his equable temperament to a degree which rendered him moody and irritable, and very unlike himself generally.

Douglas—who, by the way, had had his salary raised twice during the past year, and was now sole clerk of the establishment—had suspected of late that things were not going well with his employers, and the suspicion had, naturally, disquieted him not a little. Bee's words just now had set him thinking again, and he answered her absently and at random as they toiled up the long stairs to their rooms. The fire was out, and all was darkness. But when Douglas had struck a

match and lit a candle, Bee uttered a shrill little chirp of joy ; for there on the table lay a large brown paper parcel.

Whereupon followed — for Bee, at least — a most interesting half-hour in examining all her new “things,” while Douglas leaned across the table and watched her with grave amused eyes, in which there was yet a suspicion of sadness. When the inspection was over, and the hat, cloak and boots had been once more tried on, the child climbed upon Douglas’s knee and nestled her head against his neck.

“ Thank you so much for all these lovely things,” she whispered. “ I love you so much, Douglas. I will always be good, and never naughty.”

In a sudden and rare impulse of tenderness he caught her to him and kissed the loving upturned eyes.

“ My darling wee thing,” he said fondly, “ you are always good. I only wish I could buy you far prettier things. And so I will, some day. Just you wait and see.” Then he

added after a second or two, “ Suppose we got rich, and went away from here, where should you like to live, Bee ? ”

“ Are we going away from here ? ” she asked, raising wondering eyes to his, and answering one question with another, after the fashion of childhood.

“ No, not yet. But we shall some day, when I make all that money I told you about the other night. Should you like to live far away in the country, where there are lovely flowers and trees—and have a horse to ride, and lots of pretty frocks, and all the books you could possibly wish for ? You would like that—wouldn’t you ? ”

Bee did not answer for a minute ; then she said, shaking her head slowly :

“ No, I wouldn’t like that so well as to live on the bridge where we were to-day. Oh, Douglas, I should like to live there.”

Douglas laughed heartily.

“ You little goose ! Nobody lives on bridges.”

“ Well, we could be the very first people

who had ever lived on one," she said thoughtfully. "But of course you know I should live wherever *you* did." And she hugged him in her usual rapturous fashion.

When she had gone to bed, with her new clothes placed in a conspicuous position on a chair, so that she should see them first thing on waking in the morning, Douglas drew a chair to the table and brought out his writing. But to-night he had no copying of crabbed manuscripts to do. He was not copying anything at all, but writing on both sides of variously-sized pieces of paper, and evidently composing as he went along. For he had an idea that he had it in him to become an author. Not an altogether uncommon idea, to be sure, with young souls just beginning the world, who imagine they see life and death and sin and error from a totally new point of view, and burn to communicate their old-new impressions and reflections to the reading public. Young Conrath, however, was not fired by a desire to reform the world, but by a desire to

reform his own fortunes. Literature was to be to him not an idol, but a slave — a means to an end. He did not consider himself a genius — for, young as he was, he was not a fool — but he had resolved to work his way up, however slowly, and to take his place, not on the pinnacle which harbours genius, but in the no less honourable ranks of recognized talent. Nor did he intend to make his pen his sole hope of livelihood. It was only to be a side-wind.

As yet his efforts had not been successful. The literary attempts of a lad of sixteen are not usually characterized by either power or brilliancy, or careful composition, or faultless grammar ; and Douglas's productions erred in all these particulars. To do him justice, he had the sense to see they fell short somewhere, and most of them were torn up almost as soon as they were finished. Only one had eventually, after tender care and pruning, found its way to the editor of some popular magazine, who had promptly returned it without comment of any kind.

But the strong, almost fierce "*I will!*" in the lad kept his heart from failing. Given health and an indomitable will, and circumstances rarely fail to yield to never-ceasing hard work, hand-in-hand with a set purpose.

"*To conquer fame and fortune!*"

The words of his dream were always present with this heavily-handicapped young mariner on life's stormy sea. They seemed to ring in his ears night and day; they nerved his heart for that hardest of all tasks, *to wait*—not idly, but in doing the work that lay nearest, and doing it as well as he "*knew how.*"

To-night he read over his closely-written sheets with a contemptuous smile, then tore them ruthlessly into fragments and flung them into the fireplace. After sitting for some time with his head resting dejectedly on his hands, he took down one of a pile of tattered school-books and applied himself to hard study until far on in the morning.

* * * * *

It was now May—May in her loveliest,

sweetest guise, warm and sunny and flower-scented. Mayfair and Belgravia were well launched upon their yearly hard treadmill of never-ending gaiety, and the golden-hued butterfly existence of fashion's votaries looked fair as apples of Sodom to those who could not see—or had not reached—the dust and ashes within.

In the small attic-floor in Garth Street with which we have become familiar, however, there lay once more a heavy shadow. For Debenham and Carslake had become bankrupt, and the offices in Little Queen Street were closed. Thus Douglas Conrath was on the look-out for another situation. This last, as some of my readers may—or may not—have had occasion to know, is apt to become a soul-sickening occupation enough, and one of which a very little goes a very long way. Its weariness had been lightened, for Douglas, however, by a small but unexpected piece of good luck. He had had a short story accepted by one of the shilling magazines; and though he had received comparatively

little remuneration for it, the very fact of its having been accepted brightened the mental horizon of the young author wonderfully. And it wanted brightening sadly, for what lay between looked black enough. But Bee was another point of brightness. She was growing more “old-fashioned” and companionable every day. Douglas often found himself talking to her almost as though she were grown up; and she really was a singularly wise little woman for her years. She could read now, quite well; and read aloud to Douglas for half-an-hour every evening, struggling over the big words and discussing the story—or whatever it might be—afterwards, in a way that convulsed her listener with laughter.

They were far from unhappy at this time, though the dread wolf of starvation prowled so terribly near their door. They had but little to eat, and that little of the plainest; but they had youth and health and hope—and they loved each other.

On Sundays they sometimes went to hear

service in Westminster Abbey, where the music made Bee think of Heaven, where “mammy” was. Douglas himself did not believe much in church-going, but he had a vague idea that he ought to attend to the morals of the “little one” as well as her education. Often on week days he would take her to one of the free libraries—for alas! he had plenty of time now—where she used to sit as still as a mouse, looking at some picture-book while he pursued some deep branch of study. But as a rule she found these days slow, and much preferred being taken for a long walk, a pleasure in which Douglas indulged her whenever he could, for the child looked pale and was growing fast. Bee’s favourite expedition was to Temple Gardens, where they used to spend hours at a time when the weather was fine, and when Douglas had no prospective situations to see after. He used to take whatever book he was studying at the time, with his pencil and note-book, and sit on one of the seats under the trees, while Bee ran up and down the

walks and round the flower-beds, coming back every few minutes to lay her little head on his knee and tell him she was “so happy,” and ask if she was “his baby.” And the birds sang, and the sun shone, and the busy life of London roared round them, present yet invisible. Drowsy, sunny Temple Gardens ! Who could imagine, among your trees and flowers and peaceful twitter of birds, how near you lie to the heart of the never-resting city, with its sin and care and sorrow !

One June afternoon, while Bee was careering along the walk nearest the river in pursuit of a smoky town butterfly, which fondly imagined itself to be a white one, an old lady and gentleman who were coming from the opposite direction stopped and spoke to her.

“What’s your name, my dear?” said the old lady, who looked nervous and somewhat excited.

“My name is Bee, and then Conrath,” the child replied with dignity.

For though Bee was only a poor little girl

who lived in an attic, she was not accustomed to be spoken to by strangers, and she did not like it.

“And where do you live?” said the old gentleman in a hard, rasping voice.

“In Garth Street,” was the composed answer. “But Douglas doesn’t like me to speak to people I don’t know.”

And so saying Miss Bee walked away, and seated herself close to Douglas, from which vantage-ground she surveyed her late interlocutors with round disapproving eyes. They passed twice, talking earnestly, and glancing occasionally at Bee and her companion. Then they were joined by a tall spare man in blue spectacles, with whom they finally walked away.

Bee related the conversation verbatim to Douglas, who, being absorbed in “Plato’s Dialogues,” only answered absently :

“Don’t bother, there’s a good little woman.”

Soon after this Douglas closed his book and said it was time to go home. They walked

along the Embankment hand-in-hand in the level light of the setting sun, the light summer wind blowing velvety against their faces, and ruffling Bee's short feathery curls.

* * * * *

It was a dull sultry afternoon some weeks later. Douglas was walking restlessly about the room, stopping every now and then at the open window to look out into the dusty street.

He had not succeeded in getting any employment of any kind. He owed Mrs. Dobbs two weeks' rent, and he had only a couple of shillings in the world. Something very like despair was beginning to creep round his heart. What if circumstances should prove too strong for him after all? he thought drearily. He was no coward. It was for Bee his heart failed him. Poverty and want he could combat for himself; but for Bee—little Bee— He looked at her sadly. No sign of care about *her*. Her frock was turned up and pinned round her waist, *à la* Mrs. Dobbs, and with a very

business-like face and air she was dusting all Douglas's books, an occupation which she pursued intermittently at all hours of the day. She was humming gently to herself, and the tip of her little red tongue was plainly visible, as it always was when she was busy or absorbed. When she had finished she put away her duster and climbed upon a chair by the window to water the plants, which looked sickly and drooping in the thundery heat.

“ Douglas,” she called out presently in great excitement, “ do come and look. The most beautiful carriage at our door, with two brown horses and two coachmen.”

As she spoke a thundering knock echoed from the door below, and when a considerable time had elapsed the door of the room was thrown open by Mrs. Dobbs, and an old lady and gentleman walked in — the very same old lady and gentleman who had spoken to Bee in Temple Gardens. The lady was very stout, and very handsomely dressed. Her companion was also stout, and had

rather a fierce appearance. The latter at once addressed himself to Douglas, whose dark blue eyes held a look of surprised inquiry, not unmixed with resentment, for some swift intuition informed him of the object of their visit.

“Good morning, my good lad, good morning,” said the old gentleman in a loud pompous voice. “My name is Chandler—Joseph Chandler. We saw you and the little girl there a few weeks ago in Temple Gardens. Mrs. Chandler”—this with a wave of his hand towards the old lady, who had seated herself in a chair, and was panting loudly, and very much after the fashion of Mrs. Dobbs—“Mrs. Chandler, I say, was struck by the likeness the child bears to our daughter, who—um—who died some years ago. The woman downstairs tells me you are the little girl’s brother. I want to know if that is the case.”

There was something inexpressibly insolent and overbearing about Mr. Chandler’s manner, and Douglas was conscious of a wild

and almost uncontrollable desire to say something equally aggressive in return. But he did not. He only requested his visitor to be seated. Then he sat down himself; for a curiously sick feeling had taken possession of him. Could it be true — could it be *possible* that his gentle, refined little Bee could belong to these people? — that this vulgar old man could be her grandfather? — this cook-like old woman her grandmother? If so, it was a sad shattering of all his fondly-imagined dreams regarding her birth.

He suddenly became aware that Mr. Chandler was speaking. His voice was harsher now, and more pronounced in accent than before. His appeared and disappeared with wild inconsequence. Mrs. Chandler was making breathless overtures to Bee, who had retreated within the shelter of Douglas's arm.

“We saw the child, as I said, in Temple Gardens, some weeks ago,” Mr. Chandler was saying, his eyes meanwhile roving contemptuously round the barely-furnished room, “and

Mrs. C.—Mrs. Chandler, I should say—considered her the living image of what our daughter Sarah was at that age. As the child gave us her name and the name of this street, we have managed to trace her, and a fine troublesome job it has been. If it turns out that she *is* our grand-daughter, of course we shall relieve you of the care of her. So, my lad, be prepared to answer any questions I may put to you."

Douglas's face grew a shade paler, but he did not speak. Mr. Chandler cleared his throat, flourished one hand, on which an enormous diamond glittered, and went on :

"Our daughter Sarah ran away from a good Christian 'ome to be married to a snuff-the-moon young scamp who had nothing but his handsome face to recommend him. Mrs. C. and me were in a poor way then, and lived out at Peckham. Well, a year or two, or may be three, passed, and we heard nothing of Sarah, until one afternoon we got a line from St. George's Hospital, saying as how a young woman was dying there and had sent

for us. When we got there, we found it was our daughter Sarah, and she died soon after. She was a widow, she said, and she was in a great way about her little child ; she kep' crying out that it was lost, that it had run out into the street while she was in some shop, and that it would be killed—and things like that. But we took it for ravings, for we never knew she had had a child ; and besides at that time I didn't see my way to burdening myself with other folks' children. But when I made my pile, which I did all in a leap, as one might say, not to mention a thumping legacy from a relative in Australia, my old woman—Mrs. Chandler, I should say—took a notion to adopt a little one ; and we had almost fixed on a child from the Foundling, when we saw this little girl in Temple Gardens. Mrs. C. would have it that it must be Sarah's child—the likeness was so strong—and nothing would serve her but that we should ferret her out. So what I want to know is, if she really is your sister or no. Even if she is, as my old woman — Mrs.

Chandler, I should say—has taken the fancy into her head, and as you seem to have enough to do, from what your landlady says, to keep yourself, perhaps we may come to some arrangement about taking the little miss for our own. Of course, I should be liberal, you know. Thank God ! I can afford to indulge my wife's notions, whatever the cost may be.” Here the speaker paused, and used his pocket-handkerchief with fierce violence.

A wave of colour rushed over the lad's face, then receded, leaving it white as death.

“ You are suggesting that I should sell my little sister to you ? ” he said in a strange hard voice.

“ No, no, Douglas ; don't sell me ! ” cried Bee in a sudden agony of tears.

“ Hush ! ” he said almost sternly. But as he spoke he pressed her to him so tightly that he almost hurt her. Then he looked straight at his visitor, his eyes flashing, his lips trembling somewhat.

“ I am poor,” he went on, speaking slowly

and seemingly with difficulty—"very poor. But—I am not quite so poor—as that."

"She is your sister, then?" demanded Mr. Chandler.

The lad was silent.

"Now, no shuffling, sir," blustered the old gentleman; "yes, or no. Is she your sister or is she not?"

"Bee," said Douglas, commanding his voice with an effort, "go into my room, and remain there until I call you."

The child went at once, winking very fast to keep back her tears. When the door had closed after her, Douglas said coldly,

"Now, Mr. Chandler, I am ready to answer any questions you may wish to put to me."

At the end of a somewhat hectoring examination, the boy's sore heart was fain to acknowledge that it did indeed seem possible that these people had a claim upon his little girl.

"I cannot part with her," he said hoarsely. "I—cannot give her up."

"My good lad, if we can prove our claim,

you won't be asked whether you can part with her or not," answered Mr. Chandler roughly. "However, I've prepared you, and——"

Here Mrs. Chandler, who had hitherto taken no part in the conversation, broke in :

"And I'm sure it would be a blessed change for the poor child, for she would have every comfort, and decent clothes to her back, not to speak of——"

"There, there, Eliza, that'll do," interrupted her husband sharply. "If the child is our grand-daughter, this young fellow will have to let her go, and no more about it, so don't talk." Then, turning to Douglas, "And even if she isn't, you must be a young fool to hesitate. You acknowledge she's no relation of yours, and I suppose you have the sense to know you can't go on living together when you're a young man and she's a young woman? However, I shall consult my lawyer, and have the thing thoroughly sifted. Of course, if we prove our claim, we'll arrange that you may see your little friend

occasionally, and I shall repay you for any expense you may have been put to. Not that it can be much ; but I like to be just, and——”

“That will do !” interrupted Douglas in a queer voice. “I shall be glad if—you will go now. Good afternoon.”

“Good-day to you,” returned Mr. Chandler, turning red with anger ; “and I’d advise you to keep a civil tongue in your head, young man, or perhaps you’ll wish you had.”

But Douglas hardly heard him.

When he closed the door after them, he sat down by the table and leaned his head on his hands. A storm of conflicting feelings raged in his heart. To lose Bee !—it would take all the light out of his life. And yet—ought he not to rejoice that a way of escape should be opened for her, poor little woman, out of the weary road of want and privation which must be his for so long, perhaps for always ? He could have almost borne to part with her if these people had been gentle, courteous, well-born, like his

own father and mother. Would Bee grow to be like her newly-found relatives? (For he had a chill conviction that they *were* her relatives.) Should he see her changing year by year, until she was no longer the dainty loving creature he knew—the same, yet *not* the same? He could not bear to think of it. He rose hastily, opened the door of his room, and said sadly enough :

“ You can come out now, Bee.”

She took his hand and went with him back into the sitting-room. On her cheeks and lashes lay tears too heavy for childhood. He sat down and took her on his knee, stifling a half sob as he felt the dear baby arms twine round his neck.

“ Douglas,” she sobbed piteously, “ you won’t sell me? You *won’t* send me away, *will* you? ”

“ Hush! Bee, darling,” he made answer. “ You—you don’t understand.”

“ I do—I do,” wept the little creature. “ I know that wicked old man wants to take me away. But you won’t let him, will you? ”

I'm your baby—not his. You *couldn't* do without me."

"Dear little Bee, listen to me," he said, trying to speak steadily.

Then he tried to explain as well as he could to her childish mind that she was not really his little Bee at all—that they were brother and sister only in love, not in reality.

"And you know, my darling," he went on, "if as this man—this Mr. Chandler—says, you are his grand-daughter, I must let you go—I cannot help it. But we shall know very soon. And if—if I must give you up, I know you will never forget me, dear. And we shall see each other sometimes, I hope ; and—we shall always love each other."

But Bee wept sorely and would not be comforted. She was Douglas's "little girl"—his baby, and she could not understand why she should belong to any one else. And Douglas's heart was very heavy ; for the certainty was fast deepening that these terribly vulgar old people had indeed the right to take his darling from him, and that, once separated,

their lives would flow very, very far apart—perhaps lose sight of each other for ever.

Tea was a sad enough meal that night. Bee's tears fell fast into the tea-cups. And Douglas was very silent. He was thinking sorrowfully of many days and evenings, of months and years, when the dear child-face opposite him would be only a memory ; when the room would be strangely still and silent ; when his heart would be empty. Then his face burned as he thought of old Chandler's coarse insinuation as to the years to come. Whose business was it, he thought, with the fierce self-lawgiving of boyhood, if they should choose to live together until they were old ? What brother and sister could be more to each other than they ?

After tea they sat by the window silently, their arms clasped about each other, the fair head leaning heavily against the dark one. The narrow street grew darker, noisier. Stars came out in the dusky sky. And little Bee sobbed herself to sleep.



Some days passed, and it was proved beyond doubt that Bee was not Bee Conrath at all, but the child of the Chandlers' only daughter, and that she was thenceforth to be known as Katharine Adeane.

And then—ah ! then there came a dreadful day when a little sobbing, trembling figure, with dishevelled hair and eyes red and swollen with weeping, clung despairingly to the one friend she knew in the whole world—face to face with her first real sorrow. While in the street below Mr. Chandler's horses champed their bits and pawed the ground in lordly impatience. Mrs. Chandler was in the carriage; she had not come up. The stairs, she said, would be the death of her.

Douglas's face was very white, and his voice was very low and tremulous, though infinitely tender, as he bent over his lost baby, murmuring :

“ My little Bee, you will be brave. You promised you would. Don't cry, darling, or—or you will make me cry too.”

His voice failed just here, and he clasped the child convulsively in his arms.

“Good-bye, my darling. May God take care of you and bless you always,” he said with a quick dry sob.

She clung to him tightly, bravely trying “not to cry.”

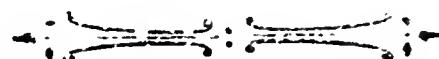
That was their parting.

For a minute silence throbbed through the little room. Then he carried her downstairs and put her into the carriage without a single word. He did not even greet Mrs. Chandler, save by a slight bend of the head.

He stood back—still silently—while the footman closed the door, and shut Bee out from the old life for ever. With a clatter of hoofs the horses dashed off down the street, amid the shrill shouts of a small crowd of street Arabs who had assembled on the pavement.

But Douglas saw nothing but a pale, wistful little face, and eyes that tried to be tearless in obedience to his desire. A few more heart-beats, and Bee was whirled away out of his sight.

He stood quite still for a minute or two, his teeth pressed hard upon his under-lip. Then he walked rapidly down the street—walked on and on and on, until his limbs ached and his head felt giddy. But he did not turn homeward. He could not go back to that silent room. Not yet.



CHAPTER V.

A PRECOCIOUS YOUNG WOMAN.

“ Let not the children weep ; the dew is so heavy on the young flowers.”

—JEAN PAUL RICHTER.

“ God sets some souls in shade, alone ;
They have no daylight of their own ;
Only in lives of happier ones
They see the shine of distant suns.
God knows. Content thee with thy night,
Thy greater Heaven hath grander light.
To-day is close. The hours are small.
Thou sit’st afar, and hast them all.”

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MRS. CHANDLER was seated in her gorgeously-furnished drawing-room in Portland Place. I use the word “gorgeous” advisedly. The room was not pretty, nor homelike, nor tasteful, nor artistic—it was simply gorgeous. The trail of the upholsterer lay over it all. Mrs. Chandler herself—dressed in grass-green velvet, picked out with black—had something of the same air of uneasy grandeur—a

grandeur to which she plainly was not born. She had a perpetual air of sitting for her portrait—poor woman. For when she succeeded in assuming the attitude and smile which she believed were the attitude and smile of a woman “in society” she felt afraid to move, lest the effect should be spoiled. Not that she cared to shine in society, but Mr. Chandler desired that she should, and now, as in the old Peckham days, Mr. Chandler’s word was law. Mrs. Chandler, however, in spite of all her efforts, never looked in the least like a lady of fashion. But she had a nice, honest, wholesome face with little brown eyes that disappeared altogether when she laughed, and a quantity of thick grey hair. She had a tall, well-proportioned figure too—at least it had once been well-proportioned. But now the boundary lines of waist and neck had vanished, and were as though they had never been. It was irresistibly conveyed to the casual observer that if her face had been the least bit larger, her skin would not have covered it. As it was the skin was so painfully stretched

and glazy as to make on-lookers tremble when she smiled.

A lady was seated opposite her, a lady also tall, but thin to leanness. Her eyes and hair were of an indefinite ash colour, and her features were of a singular delicacy and refinement. Her dress, though plain, was in exquisite taste; her every movement full of grace.

“ My dear Mrs. Chandler,” she was saying in a languid, mellow voice, “ it is really very interesting. I did not know until quite lately that you and Mr. Chandler had any family. How sad that your only child should have married so unfortunately. And how strange your meeting the little girl in that chance way. Really, it is quite a romantic story. Nearly eight years old, you say? She will be a charming companion for my little Fay. Can I not see her? ”

“ Well, really, Lady Dinwoodie, I’m almost ashamed to have her brought down. She’s the most determined little fury. And sullen, to that extent you would not believe it. It’s

my belief she would rather be back in that low street, with that upsetting young lad, than here with all the luxuries of—of wealth,” concluded the old lady somewhat vaguely.

“ Ah, poor child, it is all strange to her,” answered Lady Dinwoodie with a softened look in her eyes as she glanced at her own little daughter, who was seated demurely upon a low chair near her.

“ And cries in her bed at nights for ‘ Douglas—Douglas,’ ” went on the old lady in an aggrieved tone, “ until it’s heart-breaking to hear her.”

“ This Douglas was her adopted brother, I think you said ?” asked the other lady.

“ Yes. And I will say he seemed fond of the child. A nice lad enough, I should say, though ’aughty for his station in *my* opinion. And I’m sure all the clothes he had on couldn’t have cost more than a few shillings.”

“ Ah ! ” said the other drily, and with a faint inflection of contempt in her even tones.

Lady Dinwoodie despised the Chandlers.

But then, what of that? We are not bound to reverence all our acquaintances. It is not altogether unprecedented for an impecunious lady of title to be hand and glove with the underbred wife of an equally underbred millionaire. I suppose Lady Dinwoodie had her reasons for cultivating the Chandlers. There are reasons for most friendships in modern London, and they are not necessarily either noble or disinterested reasons. And Lady Dinwoodie usually had very good and sufficient reasons for all she did—or said, for that matter. She was not really a much more elevated character than this big vulgar woman whom she despised. And she was not nearly so warm-hearted, which of course was very sensible of her; for warm-heartedness is quite a second-rate sort of quality, as we all know. Her little daughter Fay possessed, perhaps, the one soft spot in her ladyship's heart—and even Fay only touched that spot occasionally. I fancy Fay Dinwoodie must have resembled her father (who had died shortly after her birth). She certainly did not resemble her

mother, being small and pert-looking, and not strikingly refined either in manners or appearance. She had fair hair, and dark eyes and eyebrows, which piquant combination gave her an elfish look, not altogether unattractive.

“I want to see the little girl,” she announced abruptly, and with a certain aggrieved air.

She hated paying afternoon calls, and she thought afternoon calls in the Chandlers’ ugly drawing-room a special penance.

“I want to see the little girl,” she repeated more loudly, as no notice was taken of her.

“And so you shall, my dear,” said Mrs. Chandler, with her fat good-natured smile; “and I’m sure I hope you will be friendly, living so near and that.”

She rang the bell as she spoke, and told the man who appeared in answer to tell Miss Adeane’s nurse to send her downstairs. After some little delay, “Miss Adeane” was forcibly led into the room, a forlorn-looking little figure enough, in spite of her smart frock and shoes with silver buckles.

“Come, Katharine, my dear,” said her grandmother in a wheedling voice—(Mrs. Chandler much admired the name of Katharine, and she pronounced it with a marked emphasis upon the last syllable)—“come away and speak to this lady and to this pretty little miss.”

Bee simply glared—there was no other word for it—but she did not speak.

“Come, come, now,” went on the old lady, with a growing touch of asperity in her tone, “Come and say ‘How do you do,’ prettily. Oh, fie! to scowl like that.”

“I don’t want to speak to anybody,” was the uncompromising reply in a choked voice. “I want to go home.”

“Oh dear, dear,” said Lady Dinwoodie in her soft languid voice, “this is really very sad.”

Little Fay had risen, and was regarding the new comer curiously.

“What are you crying for?” she said gravely.

“I’m not crying,” flashed out the other.

“Yes, you are,” persisted Fay. “Your

eyes are red, and tears are coming out of them, so you must be crying. What a baby you must be."

"Take little Miss Dinwoodie to the nursery and show her your doll, Katharine, my dear," said Mrs. Chandler. "You'll soon be great friends, I can see."

But "Katharine" stood still, silent and miserable, upon which Fay, in obedience to a look from her mother, promptly took the other little one by the hand and led her away.

Bee made no resistance, and presently both children stood in the airy, comfortable day-nursery which had been prepared for the small waif of Garth Street. An elderly woman sat sewing in an inner room. This was Collins—Bee's nurse and chosen foe.

"You don't really play with dolls, I hope?" asked Fay, fixing her bright dark eyes upon her companion after an exhaustive survey of the apartment.

For answer Bee pointed to a heap of silk and lace, surmounted by a golden crop of "real"

hair, which lay upon the floor in a corner. It was a lovely waxen baby, or rather it had been. Now, alas! its face was ruthlessly beaten in, its eyes had disappeared, leaving in their place two dreadful hollows.

“I *hate* it!” said the murdered baby’s mamma passionately. “I broke it, and I’m glad. I want to go home. I want to be with Douglas again.”

“Well, I’m glad you don’t play with dolls, you know,” observed Fay, with her most grown-up air. “I shouldn’t have thought much of you if you had. I should think you’re the same age as me, and I wouldn’t be seen playing with dolls, I can tell you. Only babies play with dolls. And I’m nine years old. Let’s talk about things,” she added abruptly. “Do you go to many parties?”

“Parties! What’s that?” asked the unrepentant doll-breaker, somewhat sullenly.

Fay regarded her with open scorn.

“You don’t know what *parties* are!” she exclaimed with wide, amazed eyes. “Why—where *have* you lived, my dear?” (This with

an exact reproduction of her mother's voice and manner.) "Why, parties are *lovely*," she went on patronizingly. "You have on a pretty frock, you know—some girls have a new one each time, but mother can't afford that. And you dance and wave a fan about and look silly, and pretend to be tired, like grown-up ladies do. And then some boy takes you down to supper, and you eat as much as ever you can and pull crackers. Then you dance again, and then you come away. And when you drive home it is quite dark and late, and all the lamps are lighted."

Both children were seated upon the broad low window-seat by this time. Bee had been listening with but a faint appearance of interest.

"It doesn't sound very nice," she said indifferently. "I'd rather go for a walk with Douglas, or else roast apples with him." And the grey eyes filled with tears.

"Who *is* Douglas?" inquired Miss Fay in a dubious tone.

"He is my brother, and I do love him so.

And he will be so lonely without me, and will have no little housekeeper."

"Why doesn't he live here, then, if he is your brother?" asked Fay, knitting her strongly-marked brows.

"Because he says he isn't my brother now, and they," with a rebellious jerk backwards of her head, "say he isn't either, and that they are my grandpapa and grandmamma."

"Well, so they are," observed practical Fay. "I heard mother say so. Is Douglas a nice boy?" she went on. "Is he at Eton?—or has he a tutor? My cousin Cyril—he is Sir Cyril Northburgh, you know, because Uncle Philip is dead—has left Eton, and been travelling all over strange countries with his tutor. He and Aunt Emily live in our square. Very likely I shall marry him when I grow up. I heard mother and Aunt Emily talking about it yesterday. Has your Douglas a tutor?"

"I don't know," Bee answered, wondering vaguely what a "tutor" might be.

Fay sat silent for a few minutes, then she said suddenly :

“Look here, Katharine——”

“My name isn’t Katharine,” flashed out the other. “It’s Bee.”

“Bee? What a queer name? Haven’t you any other? *My* name’s Fay, but my real name is Felicia. But I was going to say, wouldn’t it be fun if you and me were to go to see your Douglas some day. He would get a surprise, wouldn’t he?” She lowered her voice as she spoke and glanced towards the inner room. “Of course we needn’t tell anybody, you know,” she said, “or they would be sure to stop us.”

Little Bee had sprung to her feet with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks.

“Oh, yes, yes—we will go,” she cried excitedly.

“Hush!—you little silly,” broke in Fay—who, indeed, was quite a woman of the world compared to unsophisticated Bee—“don’t you say a word about it. Where does Douglas live?”

“In Garth Street,” sighed Bee.

“Garth Street? Where’s that? Is it in Belgravia, or Mayfair, or Kensington, or where?”

“Don’t know,” dejectedly.

“Oh well, we’ll find it. You just do all your grandmother tells you, and don’t behave like a baby. And then, don’t you see, she’ll let you do pretty much as you like.”

“But I don’t love her, and I don’t want to do what she tells me,” muttered Bee, to whom love and obedience were one.

“Love her?” repeated Fay—“no, of course you don’t love her. But you’ll find it better to do what she tells you.” This with a wise little nod of her flaxen head. “Why, I don’t love Aunt Emily—but I have to do what she tells me.”

Bee was silent, and Fay continued :

“On fine days Ann and I always walk in the Park or in Kensington Gardens. Ann is my maid, you know. At least she is my nurse, but I always call her my maid. If

you like you can come too. We could walk round this way and call for you."

"Could we go to see Douglas?" asked the other wistfully.

"Not with Ann," was the decided answer. "But don't you be afraid. *I'll* take you—whenever we get a chance. It will be just the greatest piece of fun. But," impressively, "be *sure* you don't speak of it."

Anything in the shape of an adventure was dear to the heart of this precocious young lady of nine years old. It was not so very long ago since she had driven her mother almost frantic by disappearing for a whole morning in search of Buckingham Palace, being fired with the ambitious desire of interviewing her sovereign personally and privately. Upon that occasion she had lost her way, and been ignominiously brought home by a policeman. There was a curious difference between her precocity and Bee's old-fashionedness. The latter was so essentially childlike; the other so weirdly unchildlike, and shrewd, and full of worldly

wisdom. But they became great friends, and their friendship was never broken in all the years that came after.

* * * * *

Bee gradually became reconciled to her new life. True, she still wept nightly as she lay in her little bed in the dark ; and she still compared the grandeur of Portland Place most unfavourably with Garth Street. But she was docile and obedient, and very seldom indulged in any of her former fits of sullenness or passion. Her grandfather she rarely saw, nor could she ever be induced to speak to him. Her grandmother she tolerated passively ; answering when she spoke to her, and behaving “ prettily ” when the old lady took her to drive in the Park, or to pay afternoon calls.

One day Bee was thrown into the seventh heaven of delight by receiving a letter from Douglas. It was a very nice letter, and was printed, not written, so that its recipient could read it quite easily. It was addressed, “ Miss Katharine Adeane,” but it began, “ My dearest Bee.” The child wore it inside her

frock, and read it until it was almost worn away with being unfolded so often. She showed it with great pride to Fay, and that young person perused it with interest, and carefully spelled out the address—13, Garth Street, Westminster."

"Hurrah!" she exclaimed softly, clapping her tiny hands—they were in the nursery at Portland Place, ready to go for a walk with Ann—"Hurrah! We'll go to-day, Bee, if we get the chance. We will—we will."

The colour came quickly to Bee's face; her eyes sparkled.

"Oh, Fay—I *love* you!" she exclaimed impetuously, flinging her arms round the other's neck.

But Fay disengaged herself quickly. She did not care for demonstrations of affection—considered them babyish, in fact. And yet in her way the little minx was fond of Bee—though she wouldn't for worlds have told her so.

Nothing could have been more demure than Miss Fay's general demeanour as she

trotted by Ann's side along the wind-swept pavements on this particular September afternoon. But every now and then she pinched Bee's arm, and allowed a little smile to dimple over her face in a way indicative of suppressed glee. As for Bee, she was quite happy. She was going to see Douglas—perhaps to stay with him always, and be his little housekeeper once more, in which case Fay would of course come to see them every day. Sweet, inconsequent shortsightedness of childhood!—in which all things are possible that are desirable, where geese are all swans, and every ant-hill is a mountain, where a year is a lifetime, and Heaven a sure and certain goal!

The children walked and played about in Kensington Gardens until nearly dusk, then went slowly homeward along the Bayswater Road. Shortly after they had passed the Marble Arch, Ann entered a draper's shop on some mission of her own. Fay and Bee roamed about in their usual fashion, examining everything within reach, and chatting

volumbly. For a few minutes Ann forgot all about them, being engaged in matching a particular shade of ribbon. In these few minutes Fay grasped Bee's hand and whispered exultantly :

“ Now!—now—quick!”

In another second they were out of the shop, and skimming like two young swallows down a side street, from which they swung round to the right into Seymour Street, where Fay stopped, panting and breathless, her eyes dancing with excitement and mischief. The next moment, to her companion's speechless awe and delight, she had hailed a passing hansom, and pushing Bee in, scrambled hastily after her, and shut the doors with quite an imposing bang.

“ Drive to 13, Garth Street, Westminster,” said Fay imperiously, addressing the driver’s eye, which gazed down at them through the little trap-door in the roof.

“ All right, miss,” said a gruff chuckling voice.

And they drove off just as the distracted

Ann came rushing round the corner in search of them. But of course she never thought of looking into the hansom.

* * * * *

It was dreary enough in Garth Street after “the little one” was gone. So dreary that Douglas almost dreaded coming home from his long pilgrimages in fruitless search for work. The room seemed so terribly still. The stillness and the silence hurt him somehow. There had been no want of stir and life when Bee had been the presiding spirit of the place. Even now Douglas seemed to hear the ripple of her childish laughter, the sound of her restless feet, the murmuring of her tender little voice in his ear. The dust lay thick on his books ; the plants in the window drooped and faded — now that the little housekeeper was gone.

Times had been hard with him after Bee left, so hard that he was thankful she was not there to share them. He economized in every possible way. He gave up his bedroom, and slept in the cupboard-like apart-

ment which had been Bee's, and which went with the little sitting-room. He reduced his food to almost infinitesimal fractions. Nevertheless, he owed Mrs. Dobbs for several weeks' rent, and that worthy woman began to look injured and sullen, and to make audible remarks (addressed to no one in particular) in her young lodger's hearing, anent "poor widows being put upon," etc.

About the beginning of September, however, Douglas, having replied to an advertisement for some one to copy deeds at home at so much per folio, was fortunate enough to be selected from a shoal of other applicants ; and as he worked well and swiftly, he gradually succeeded in obtaining quite as much employment of this kind as he could conscientiously overtake. It was wretchedly paid employment, of course ; but it kept him from starving, and enabled him to pay his arrears of rent. But it didn't do much more.

One afternoon he was writing busily, as usual — his table drawn close up to the window to catch the last rays of the fast-

waning autumn light. One could see that the world had not been using him over well. His clothes were worn and shabby, and looked more than a size too small for him. For young bones and muscles will stretch out, in spite of poor and insufficient food — and Douglas was growing fast. His face was pale and thin, and heavy shadows lay under his eyes. But the light in the eyes themselves burned steadfastly still ; the lines of the mouth were more resolute than ever. Poverty and privation and loneliness had not conquered the struggling, panting, never-resting soul — not a boy's soul now, but a man's.

All at once he laid down his pen and listened. Swift eager feet were climbing the stairs — children's feet, surely ? They came nearer — nearer. They were on the landing.

Douglas rose hastily from his chair ; but before he could reach the door it was flung open, and a tiny figure — such a smart figure in moss-green velvet, with beaver trimmings ! — precipitated itself into his arms.

“ Bee ! Why, Bee — my dear little girl, where did you come from ? ” he exclaimed in mingled surprise and delight.

But Bee did not answer. She was rubbing her head against his shabby jacket, just as she used to do, and clinging to him with spasmodic kisses and little shrieks of joy. The smart hat lay unheeded on the floor.

“ I’ve come back ! I’ve come back ! I’ve come to *stay* ! ” she announced joyfully, when a minute or so had passed, during which Douglas felt a strange lump in his throat, and an unwonted mist over his eyes.

“ To stay ? ” he repeated, smoothing back the bright tangled locks. “ No, dear, not to stay, I’m afraid. Who brought you ? ”

“ I brought her,” put in a sharp little voice from the door. “ And I think, Bee—I really think — that you might have been polite enough to introduce me.”

“ Oh this is Fay,” said Bee, slipping out of Douglas’s arms and seizing her little friend by the hand. “ She lives quite near to me, and she wanted to see you too.”

Douglas shook hands with her ; then he said gravely :

“ Did you come alone ? Does Mrs. Chandler know you have come ? ”

Both young ladies wriggled uneasily. Finally Bee, who recognized the stern look that was deepening in Douglas’s eyes, whimpered apologetically :

“ She wouldn’t have let us come if she had known.”

While Fay looked at him witheringly.

The young fellow’s face softened. He shut the door and sat down at the table.

“ Come and tell me all about it,” he said, drawing both children towards him, and speaking very gently.

In a comparatively short time—considering that Bee and Fay either both talked at once or interrupted and contradicted each other systematically and persistently—he had been “ told all about it,” and having been told, felt considerably dismayed.

“ But do you mean to say that no one has any idea where you are ? ” he said in

rather a shocked voice when the recital was ended.

“No, of course not,” returned Fay promptly. “There would have been no fun if people had known. And I must say,” she added severely—“I didn’t think you lived in a place like *this*. Bee told me it was a lovely room. And—why do you wear clothes like *these*?” placing a disgusted little gloved forefinger upon his shabby sleeve. “I thought you would look like my cousin Cyril. But you don’t—not a bit. And yet your face is nice. I shan’t mind kissing you when I say good-bye.”

“I’m not going to say good-bye,” observed Bee stoutly; “I’m going to stay for ever and ever.”

She began to pull off her gloves as she spoke, but Douglas stopped her.

“No, Bee, darling,” he said, “you must let me take you home. See, it is nearly dark, and Mrs. Chandler will be very much alarmed about you. Is the cab still there?”

But the visitors, who had clearly meditated

a protracted stay, had dismissed their Jehu, Fay having graciously presented him with half-a-crown, which had been “burning a hole” in her pocket for the last few days, and had appeared a fitting sacrifice to the occasion.

Many were the tears and wailings before Bee could be persuaded to leave her old home again. The faithful little heart saw no poverty of luxuries, or even necessaries. Shabby clothes were nothing to her, as long as they held her Douglas, her hero. Where he was there would she wish to be. At last she sobbingly promised “to be good,” and was prevailed upon to put on her hat and gloves, preparatory to going back to Portland Place—she would not call it “home.”

Fay, who had been looking disparagingly round the room, rose with alacrity.

“Do you *always* live here?” she inquired, as they went slowly down the dark narrow stair, Douglas carrying Bee, as of old.

“Yes,” he answered shortly, for he felt a

curious repulsion towards this precocious, elf-like child.

“Do you *like* living here?” she continued, when they were in the lamp-lit street.

“Little girls shouldn’t ask so many questions,” was the curt answer.

“I think you are a very rude boy,” Miss Fay rejoined with dignity. “I’m glad Bee doesn’t live with you now.”

“You had better give me your hand,” he answered coolly, as they came to a crossing, “unless you want to be run over. Come.”

“Why, don’t you take a cab?” she murmured, obeying him, however, by putting her hand in his.

“Because I can’t afford it,” was the brief reply. “We are going to take an omnibus.”

Half-an-hour later the trio mounted the steps of the Chandlers’ mansion in Portland Place. Bee was cross and tired and sleepy. Fay—bright and wideawake—was secretly resenting the severe lecture “that boy” had taken upon himself to deliver to her as they

walked up from Regent Circus, anent her leading her young companion into disobedience and insubordination.

But Fay was a naughty little girl at this period of her existence, and was therefore jubilantly unrepentant.



CHAPTER VI.

MAMMON.

“One-fourth of life is intelligible, the other three-fourths is unintelligible darkness ; and our earliest duty is to cultivate the habit of not looking round the corner.”

—RUTHERFORD.

“Dream the life I am never to mix with, and image the show

Of mankind as they live in these fashions I hardly shall know—

Schemes of life, its best rules and right uses, the courage that gains,

And the prudence that keeps what men strive for.”

—ROBERT BROWNING.

THE Chandlers happened to be giving a large dinner-party on the night of the children’s escapade. Of course Lady Dinwoodie was to be present—she was a “standing dish” at the Chandler entertainments—and on this occasion an invitation had also been sent to her nephew, Sir Cyril Northburgh, a youth of some nineteen years and much worldly experience. Indeed he was almost as

worldly-wise in his way as his nine-year-old Cousin Fay.

When Ann returned to Bryanstone Square alone, about half-past seven—for she had rushed about distractedly in search of the truants for nearly two hours—Lady Dinwoodie was under the hands of her confidential maid, Darley. But when she heard Ann's news, she sprang to her feet with a sharp cry. And then followed a very bad quarter of an hour for poor Ann, at the end of which Lady Dinwoodie fell into a fit of shuddering weeping (thereby undoing a good deal of careful work on Darley's part), sobbing out that her darling child was lost, or kidnapped, or perhaps dead, and that she herself was a worldly, frivolous woman, and that this was a judgment upon her, etc., etc.

“Go round and ask Sir Cyril to come to me at once,” she concluded hysterically at last to the miserable Ann.

Lady Dinwoodie had got into the way of consulting her nonchalant nephew on various matters. He had a fair amount of common

sense, had Cyril. As his mother, Lady Northburgh, had none at all, this was rather a good thing.

This wise youth promptly obeyed his aunt's summons, and was at once ushered up to her dressing-room. Cyril Northburgh was rather good to look at; he was tall, fair, and well-shaped, but the effect of his handsome face and figure was in some degree counteracted by an air of mingled weariness and ineffable condescension, which was apt to arouse feelings of irritation in the casual observer. He lounged into the room and propped himself up against the mantelshelf.

“Er—what’s the matter, aunt?” he inquired languidly, after a minute’s silent survey of his weeping relative. Having been put in possession of the facts, he observed, fixing his eyeglass more firmly into his left eye, “You say the little Chandler girl was with her? Then why not send along and see if she’s there.”

“Ann has been there, and she isn’t,” sobbed his aunt somewhat enigmatically.

“Don’t cry, aunt. What’s the use?” remonstrated the young man. “Look here, I’ll undertake to find her for you—sometime between this and to-morrow morning. What a little imp she is! We can send excuses for the Chandlers’ feed. And now that I think of it, I’ll go there first and see if they have heard anything. I presume they are as anxious about their granddaughter as you are about Fay.”

He sauntered off, and chanced to arrive at the Chandlers’ door just a couple of seconds later than Douglas Conrath and his two young charges.

Fay pounced upon him at once.

“Well, Cyril,” she said, with a rather overdone air of nonchalance. “Has mother been wondering where I was?”

“Well, yes, she has, rather,” was the calm answer. “May I ask, my dear young friend, where you *have* been?”

“Oh bother,” said his cousin unceremoniously. “I’ll tell you after. Allow me to introduce Douglas, Bee’s used-to-be-brother,”

she added, with dignity. “Douglas, this is my cousin, Cyril.”

Both youths bowed slightly. If anything young Conrath’s bow was the haughtier.

“Er—delighted, I’m sure,” drawled Cyril superciliously.

At this moment the door flew open, revealing a footman very gorgeous in the matter of powder and legs, who suffered a faint wave of surprise to ripple across his well-trained features at the oddly assorted group which streamed into the brightly-lighted hall. Just then Mrs. Chandler, resplendent in royal-blue velvet and diamonds, appeared between the heavy crimson curtains which draped the door of the morning-room, where, as a matter of fact, the master and mistress of the house spent most of their time when alone, feeling more at home there than in the larger apartments. On seeing Bee, who stood rubbing her eyes dejectedly, the old lady hurried forward as quickly as her size would permit, exclaiming excitedly:

“Katharine—you naughty, naughty child,

wherever have you been? Your grandpa *is* in a way, I can tell you."

Then, observing Sir Cyril, she greeted him with the agitated confusion she always displayed towards any possessor of any title. She persisted in regarding him as the restorer of her grand-daughter, and, after one brief handshake, utterly ignored poor Douglas. And the latter, with something like a sneer on his strong young face, bade a curt farewell to Bee—regardless of her piteous wailing—and swung himself out into the darkness.

A slight rain had begun to fall — but Douglas did not notice it. The old bitter sense of injustice was strong upon him. The old wound of his separation from Bee was, as it were, suddenly torn open. He had felt keenly, as he stood there in the luxuriously-furnished hall, the sharp contrast his shabby garments presented to the faultless evening-dress—partially concealed by an equally faultless overcoat—of the young aristocrat who had glanced over him so superciliously through his glittering eyeglass. He had

noted and resented Mrs. Chandler's preoccupied greeting. For he was proud—far too proud for his position and prospects, I daresay; but then, in that he was not singular. After a little while his thoughts softened, as he thought of Bee. Dear little woman! At any rate they were kind to her. She looked plump and rosy and happy, and she had not forgotten him—God bless her! And busy with these conflicting thoughts, he walked rapidly homewards through the swiftly-falling rain.

Meanwhile Fay had flatly refused to go home, announcing her intention, indeed, of remaining all night at Portland Place, and sleeping with Bee. Nor could any commands nor persuasions from her cousin move her determination. In the end it was arranged so, Cyril shrugging his shoulders resignedly over the inevitable. His small cousin always rather overwhelmed him. Fay was one of those people who always get their own way in this world, simply because they make themselves so fearfully disagreeable if they don't get it.

Word having been sent to Bryanstone Square that the little truant was safe, Mrs. Chandler accompanied Cyril to the drawing-room, and awaited her other guests. Mr. Chandler was strutting about the room (he was a short man, with iron-grey hair brushed up into a fierce cockatoo-like curl on the top of his head), conning over the list of who was to take who down to dinner. He was always in mortal terror of pairing the wrong people. His manner was more pompous than ever to-night, for his dinner-party was to include, besides other titled and untitled notabilities, a distinguished ambassador, a newly-married earl and his countess, and, oh joy! a certain bachelor duke.

The aroma of a title was sweet to old Chandler's nostrils. He loved to roll the mellifluous syllables over his tongue, and he did so unsparingly — totally regardless of good taste and etiquette. The thought of the duke made him condescend a little to-night in greeting young Sir Cyril, who for his part was secretly and silently amused thereby, and

took refuge in his most weary and most supercilious manner.

The other guests arrived in due course, and as their host affably shook hands with each in turn, he improved the occasion by informing them of “His Grace’s” momentarily expected arrival. As the greater proportion of them, had met the gentleman in question on more than one occasion (without being much impressed thereby) they viewed the prospect with tranquillity. The dinner hour came and passed, however, without the noble guest making his appearance ; and at last the crestfallen and disappointed host was reluctantly obliged to conclude that he was not coming at all. Whereupon they all went in to dinner (hopelessly mixed up as to precedence), and feasted solemnly upon the many delicacies, in and out of season, which were provided for them.

The meal over, and a brief penance in the drawing-room also over, Cyril Northburgh took his departure as soon as he decently

could. As he left the drawing-room one of the servants approached and said :

“ Beg pardon, Sir Cyril, but Miss Dinwoodie would like to see you before you go.”

“ Ah, where is she ? ” was the languid answer.

“ She is with Miss Adeane in the nursery, Sir Cyril.”

Cyril sighed, and followed the man upstairs.

In the nursery he found his little cousin and Bee arrayed in much befrilled flannel dressing-gowns, seated beside a blazing fire. A small table, laden with cakes and sweets and fruits, stood on the hearthrug.

“ We’re having a party all to ourselves, Cyril,” announced Fay, as the young man entered, “ and we thought you might like to come. Sit down.” Then she added, turning with an ineffable air of command to the old nurse, “ You can go, Collins. We shall not want you in the meantime.”

“ But—er—I say, you know, I can’t stay

to-night," returned her cousin, sitting down, however, as he spoke. "I've no end of places to go to."

"Cyril, how selfish of you"—reproachfully—"when you know you have never spoken to Bee, and——"

But at this point Bee was discovered to be silently weeping, nor would she answer any inquiries as to the cause of her grief. She looked so forlorn and miserable as she sat there, with large tears wandering down her cheeks, that even Cyril's tough heart was touched, and he set himself to amuse her so successfully that ere long her tears dried themselves in laughter. He was surprised to find "the little Chandler girl" such a well-bred child. As a matter of fact, she was several degrees more refined in looks and manners than his cousin Fay.

"Shouldn't wonder if she grows up pretty," he reflected absently, as he cracked an appalling quantity of walnuts for the young ladies' consumption, and listened to a minute recital of the afternoon's adventure.

When the little tongues ceased for a moment or two, he observed seriously :

“ Well, look here, you know, it’s not a nice sort of thing for little girls to do, running about London alone, and going to see fellows in their lodgings——”

“ Oh, don’t preach, Cyril,” interrupted Fay rudely. “ We’re not going to do it again, and so what’s the use of making such a fuss? ”

But gentle little Bee put her hand into his and said shyly :

“ It was naughty. Douglas said so too. We will never do it again.”

Her little face looked so sweet and earnest, with the tears hardly dry upon the cheeks and lashes, that Cyril, rather to his own surprise, stooped and kissed her.

And this was the beginning of a strong feeling of interest in the “ little Chandler girl,” which was to materially affect his peace of mind in the future.

* * * * *

The next four years passed swiftly. Bee grew tall and slim, and almost as self-possessed

as Fay herself. She became initiated into the delights of “parties,” and enjoyed them very much indeed. A governess came for an hour or two daily to Portland Place, and superintended mild lessons, which taxed neither the brains nor the patience of the young pupil.

Bee had now become the proud possessor of a pony, and rode every morning in the park with Fay Dinwoodie, attended by a correctly-got-up and severe-looking groom. On rare occasions Cyril Northburgh accompanied them instead of the groom, and this always gratified both children beyond words, though their escort did not scruple to find continual fault with their seat in the saddle, and their manipulation of reins, whip, and habit. Cyril himself looked remarkably well on horseback, and few horses could dispute his power of wrist and will. At other times he was, as Fay scornfully told him, “too fearfully lazy for anything.”

Bee and Douglas only met at long, long intervals; and for this the latter was entirely to blame. Many and pathetic were the

curiously-written, and more curiously-worded little letters that found their way to Garth Street—imploring him to come to see her—to tell her if he had quite forgotten her—and assuring him that she was “always his most loving child, Bee.”

But a stubborn desire for self-martyrdom debarred Douglas from accepting more than one out of every half-dozen of these invitations, though they were always fortified by permission from “grandmamma.” Besides—he used to think bitterly—what had he in common with his “little one” now? Less than nothing.

Then, again, he had not much time for visiting. For the last three years he had held the post of secretary to an eccentric old bachelor named Redman, who wrote for several of the monthly reviews, and whose acquaintance young Conrath had made accidentally one foggy November afternoon three winters ago, when the old man and the young one were waiting to interview a certain popular editor. Douglas had a well-worn roll of manuscript in his hand, which had already

performed a pretty fair journey round publishers' offices. After some desultory conversation on various topics, the old gentleman asked to be allowed to look at the manuscript the lad held, and having done so, gruffly complimented the young author upon the legibility of his handwriting.

“ I like you, young fellow,” he observed more gruffly still. “ I like your face, and I like your voice ; and, by George ! you write a good hand. Do you write quickly ? And are you in any employment ? I have a reason for asking.”

Douglas answered briefly that he was a swift writer, and that he was not in any employment.

“ Humph !” rejoined his interlocutor, regarding him critically from under his shaggy grey eyebrows. “ Let me have your name and address, will you ? ”

Several days later young Conrath received a curt note signed “ Simon Redman,” offering him the post of non-resident secretary to that gentleman at a salary of £100 a year.

It was congenial work, and Mr. Redman, if somewhat exacting, was always just, and in many ways kind and indulgent.

Douglas still wooed literature, but fitfully. In these three years he had had several short stories accepted—and paid for (the terms are not always synonymous, you know). He was now, in his spare moments, writing a one-volume novel, and built many secret hopes and possibilities upon the chance of its success. In it, as in his short stories, he concealed his identity under the name of “Michael Armstrong.”

He still lived in his old lodgings in Garth Street, but he was no longer shabby and starved-looking. As a matter of fact he was rather a fine-looking young fellow, well set-up, clean-limbed, and possessing a pair of eyes which, as Mrs. Dobbs had been heard to remark to a neighbour, “were enough to wile the bird from off the bush.” The rest of his features, however, bore the old fault of his boyhood—they were too hard and resolute for beauty.

“Take these little wrinkles off your forehead, Douglas,” Bee had said to him coaxingly on one of his rare visits to Portland Place. “They make you look so cross and old.”

But though he had smiled and kissed her, the “little wrinkles” remained, and as time went on deepened and became permanent.

One winter night, when the dying year was old and frail, he received by the last post one of Bee’s impulsive and wildly-written notes. It was even more spidery as to writing and incoherent as to matter than usual; but its gist was that the writer and Fay Dinwoodie were going to a boarding-school at Cheltenham immediately after Christmas, and would “dear, dear Douglas,” come to Portland Place on the following afternoon, and they would have tea all alone, and a nice long talk.

Douglas sat thinking for a long time after he received this letter. Was it possible that the child was grown up enough to go to school? It seemed only yesterday that he remembered her such a tiny helpless baby. And yet—she must be twelve years old.

Somehow the thought of her going away to this fashionable school appeared to raise an inseparable barrier between them. It came to him more vividly than ever, the difference there was likely to be in their lives and hopes and aims in the future. He saw that as time went on he must give up his little child friend. And this meant more to him than most people would have had any idea of. For his was a more than usually loyal and faithful nature, and clung tenaciously to old interests and affections. As for Bee, he reflected, she would soon forget—or learn to do without—the brotherly love that had been hers so long. His friendship could do her no good—at least not yet. It was better, far better, that they should drift apart. But he would go to bid her good-bye.

So he went, and he and Bee had the nursery—now dignified by the name of the school-room—all to themselves.

Bee looked very sweet and dainty in her pretty velvet frock—her red-gold hair, many shades darker than in her babyhood, waving

featherwise about her shoulders. As she sat opposite him, pouring out the tea in her gravely important little way, Douglas tried in vain to imagine the old days come back again when she had been his “little housekeeper,” and presided nightly over his tea-table. She never alluded to that antiquated joke now. Perhaps she had forgotten it. She was a dear little girl—and a loving one. But—she was not the child Bee any more, and somehow Douglas missed “the little one” whom he found it increasingly difficult to identify with this rapidly growing-up maiden with such a wealth of smart frocks, such an apparent knowledge of fashionable ways and people, and a trick of domineering over and patronizing Douglas himself at times, which long ago she would have thought nothing less than impious.

“Why don’t you have your hair cut, Douglas?” she said in the pretty imperious way she had acquired of late, “and why don’t you part it in the middle? You would look ever so much nicer, you know.”

They were sitting before the fire, Douglas having declined further refreshment in the shape of tea and cakes. At her words he leaned back in his chair and looked at her steadily, a curious little smile parting his firm young lips.

“ You find a great many faults in me now, my little sister,” he said slowly.

“ Oh no,” she answered, laying her head coaxingly against his knee. “ But Fay says you would be ever so much nicer-looking than Cyril if you would only——”

“ Don’t quote Fay to me, if you please,” interrupted Douglas coldly. “ It is not of the least consequence to me what she thinks of my appearance. I am sorry you are to be school companions. She is making you as precocious and unchildlike as she is herself. You are not my little Bee any more. You are not a child any more. I could fancy sometimes that the old days at Garth Street were all a dream, and that my little house-keeper and sister, who loved me so, was a dream also. You did not think so much of

smart clothes and looks then, Bee. I suppose by the time you come back from this grand school you will cut my acquaintance altogether. And perhaps it will be as well. I have nothing in common with your new friends."

Whereupon Bee, forgetful of her twelve years and the repose of manner which Fay considered fitting at that mature age, flung her arms round his neck, and sobbed out that he was her own dear brother always, and that he was cruel to say such things just now when she was going away so soon, and that she would never forget him—never.

But Douglas did not receive her penitence as he used to do. He only removed her arms gently, and stood up, saying it was time for him to go.

"Why no, Bee dear, of course I am not angry," he said, as she clung to him repentantly and tearfully, and begged him to forgive her, and stay with her a little longer. "I shouldn't have spoken to you so harshly, dear, I know. But you see I am an old-

fashioned, plain-spoken fellow, and not up to fashionable ways."

He smiled as he spoke ; but his smile was strained and difficult, and Bee, child as she was, knew that she had said a thing which might be forgiven—but would not soon be forgotten.

And she was right—Douglas was bitterly hurt. He was far from being a hero, poor lad, and he had a queer temper—a temper which not even his mother had been able at all times to calculate upon. Perhaps the lonely life he led had not tended to soften the hard knots in his nature—these hard knots which we so often find in strong characters, seeming to run alongside the severer virtues, and marring and effacing all the sweetness thereof. It takes many and various forms of suffering to soften such natures as these—if they are ever to be softened. And as yet Douglas had only suffered in one groove, so to speak. But it was a groove that hardens all but the very highest type of human character—which his

was far from being—the groove of grinding poverty, the never - ceasing, heart - sickening question of ways and means, the constant presence of the grisly spectre that threatens to separate body and soul. It is a spectre that usually drives away all gentler angels, and calls up other and more grisly spectres still to bear it company.

The softer virtues were fast disappearing in the heart of this young fellow of twenty-one. It was a question whether his heart would ever melt sufficiently to welcome them back again. Nevertheless, by one of these curious contradictions which nature is fond of presenting to us, he was as sensitive in some ways as a girl, in spite of all his pride and hard reserve.

And Bee's words had cut him to a degree out of all proportion to their meaning.

He said no more, however, but bade her good-bye in the grave, tender fashion he kept for her alone, chiding her lightly for her tears.

So they parted: and it so happened that for six long years they did not meet again.

CHAPTER VII.

THE GRUB BECOMES A BUTTERFLY.

“ O World ! so few the years we live
Would that the life which thou dost give
Were life indeed ! ”

—LONGFELLOW.

“ I knew from every tone of his voice, every chance expression of his honest eyes, that he was one of those characters in which we may be sure that for each feeling they express lies a countless wealth of the same, unexpressed, below ; a character the keystone of which was that whereon is built all liking and all love—*dependableness*. He was one whom you may be long in knowing, but whom the more you know the more you trust, and once trusting you trust for ever.”

—Author of “ *John Halifax*. ”

On a bright spring afternoon, a small-faced slender girl of eighteen was lying back in a low chair in the conservatory which opened out of a Philistinish drawing-room not altogether strange to us. A tall patrician-looking young man, who surveyed life through a single eye-glass and over a heavy fair mous-

tache, was leaning against one of the slender iron pillars, looking down at his companion with a faint smile upon his well-cut lips. She was looking up saucily from under her long lashes, and her eyes, though not her lips, were smiling. Was it our old friend Bee who had thus rushed up into young ladyhood, leaving not only her childish days but her school days behind her? If so, she was wonderfully changed, wonderfully improved, and yet—there were moments when she looked almost a child again.

Her companion was Sir Cyril Northburgh, looking much the same as he had done six years ago, except that his calm, colourless face was a shade calmer and more colourless, his cold eyes a trifle colder, and that he wore the moustache before alluded to.

“And so,” he was saying in his slow tired voice—“you are really a finished young lady. Do you know it makes me feel fearfully old? It seems an incredibly short time ago since you wore frocks of no length to speak of, and danced with joy, or cried with rage upon the

slightest provocation. I remember you slapped me once," he added reflectively.

Bee laughed—such a clear, ringing, child's laugh!

"Did I?" she said. "What a little vixen I must have been."

"I remember, too," he went on, pulling his moustache lazily—"how you used to worship that very estimable young man, who, I understand, adopted you at an early stage of your existence, and how——"

But the girl interrupted him.

"Don't speak in that slighting way of Douglas, if you please," she said, her small face flushing angrily. "He is one of my dearest friends, and always will be. He was kind to me when I had no one else to be kind to me. And he is worth a hundred of——"

"Of such as I!" put in her companion placidly. "Yes, I know. I never was an estimable young man, even in my palmiest days. I'm afraid you are a vixen still, Bee, —in spite of Cheltenham and Dresden. But

is it permitted that I call you Bee?—or must I say Miss Adeane for the future?"

"Oh, I don't mind," was the indifferent answer—"so long as you don't call me Katharine," she added somewhat petulantly.

"Katharine—why not Katharine?" he said in his tranquil voice. "It is a pretty name, and we have Shakespeare's authority for considering it a suitable one for young ladies of—er—uncertain temper.

But Bee was not listening to him.

"Do you know," she said, leaning forward in her chair, and speaking with a dreamy faraway look in her eyes—"I have not seen Douglas Conrath for nearly six years."

Sir Cyril altered his position slightly.

"May I suggest that that is Mr. Conrath's own loss?" he said after a pause.

"Each time I have been home I have written to him," continued the girl mournfully; "but he has not answered my last two or three letters, and he has never come to see me—not once!"

“Young cub!” muttered her companion under his breath.

“It seems so strange,” Bee went on; “because you know in heart we really are brother and sister, and always shall be.”

Sir Cyril was silent.

“My mother tells me that you and Fay are to be presented at the next Drawing-room,” he said, after a minute, with a palpable intention of changing the conversation.

“Yes,” said the girl slowly—“I suppose so. Fay is looking forward to it very much.”

“And are not you?” he said with languid interest.

“I don’t know. Somehow I don’t think I am. But I suppose it is necessary”—this with a small sigh. Grandfather says so.”

“And he is an authority, of course,” observed Cyril gravely.

“Have you seen Fay to-day?—and did she say she was coming here?” asked the girl presently.

“I saw her this morning, and she said she

was coming this afternoon. I should think she will be here shortly. By the way, have you any engagement for to-morrow morning?"

"Yes," she answered promptly; "I am going to the National Gallery."

"To the National Gallery? Good Heavens! What for?"

"Because I have never been there. Have you?"

"Most certainly not. Why should I? I should as soon think of visiting the Tower, or Madame Tussaud's."

"And have you never been to either of these places?"—this with a rising inflection of unqualified amazement.

"Never. Am I a country cousin that I should so degrade myself?"

At this moment a thin piquant face peeped in at the door of the conservatory.

"Oh, there you are," said a high rapid voice. "And you, Cyril? My dear Bee, do send him away. I have such heaps of things to talk to you about, and to tell you."

“What?—since yesterday?” asked Sir Cyril satirically.

“Pooh—yesterday! That is as good as weeks ago in London, my dear cousin. Bee—*can* you believe that it is little over a month since we left that melancholy German town? Why, it seems like a year! But listen. Mother has persuaded Mrs. Chandler to let your gown be exactly the same as mine for the Drawing-room. Your grandmother had quite set her heart upon your appearing in blue satin trimmed with red roses; but thank Heaven—and mother’s eloquence—that is mercifully averted.”

“And what are your gowns to be?” inquired Cyril with a faint smile.

“White satin with gold embroidery,” answered his cousin. “Won’t they be lovely? Why, we shall look just like——”

“Angels,” put in Cyril, strangling a yawn. “Twin-angels. Awfully fetching.”

“Oh, Cyril—do go away. You are so silly.”

“Thanks. I am going. I came to ask

Bee—yes, she has given me permission to call her Bee, as of old—if she will ride with me to-morrow morning. Will you, Bee? The Gallery can wait. Fay is coming too."

"Am I?" said that young lady, raising her eyebrows. "Well, after all, perhaps I may. My new habit came home yesterday."

"Ye Gods!" murmured Cyril—"what fetishes you girls do make of your dress-makers, and tailors, and milliners! If an angel came down to take you to Heaven, I believe you wouldn't go until you had got some new clothes, and learned the latest shape in wings."

"Don't be profane, Cyril. It's such horribly bad form now," said Fay sharply.

"You newly-fledged chicken!" he said, surveying her with lazy amusement—"who told you what was good and what was bad form? Don't you know that the word 'form' itself is out of print now in our social shibboleth?"

As he spoke he walked over to where Bee, who had risen, was bending over a heavily-

scented flowering shrub. She answered his “Good-bye” rather shortly—or he thought so.

“What is the matter?” he said in a low voice. “Have I offended you?”

“No,” she answered, raising her clear eyes to his. “But I don’t like to hear you speak—as you did just now.”

He was silent for a moment or two; then he said slowly:

“Will you give me one of these flowers?”

She did not answer, and he added:

“I shall not offend again.”

He took the flower, touched her hand lightly, and went out, closing the door somewhat sharply behind him.

“Well, really, I think Cyril might have said good-afternoon to me,” said Fay, with a good-humoured laugh. “I believe you have bewitched him, Bee.”

She pulled off her hat and gloves as she spoke, and threw herself into a green wire chair.

Fay Dinwoodie, at nineteen, was less

pronounced in many ways than in her childhood. She was prettier, too, though far from being a beauty. Some women called her interesting-looking, others peculiar-looking. Men, especially young men, pronounced her “not bad-looking, and awful fun to talk to, don’t you know.” To-day she was looking rather plain and sallow ; her flaxen hair was less becomingly arranged than usual, and the brown eyes, under their strongly-marked brows, lacked lustre and vivacity. Fay’s strong point was her figure, which was slim as to waist, and generous as to bust, “clipper-built” as to neck and limbs. Her hands, too, were small and white and slender, and she knew it, and made play with them accordingly.

Bee was by no means a beauty either ; but by virtue of her tawny hair, with its pretty rebellious wave, her clear, childlike eyes, and her marvellously pure, ivory-coloured complexion, she was very attractive to look upon.

The two girls chatted and laughed, and

drew fascinating pictures of their probable gaieties—at least Fay did—until late in the afternoon. But Bee was less talkative than usual. She was haunted by a little story she had been reading in *Temple Bar*, signed “Michael Armstrong.” It was strange, she thought—so many tricks and turns of expression reminded her of Douglas. Dear old Douglas! how long, how very long a time it was since she had seen him!

“Granny,” she said that evening at dinner, when the dessert was upon the table, and the servants had left the room, “I should like to ask Douglas Conrath to come and see me one day soon. You know it is years since we saw each other, and I shouldn’t like him to think that—that I had forgotten him.”

Her grandfather looked up from his walnuts with a quick frown.

“God bless my soul, Katharine, what sentimental nonsense is this?” he said loudly and aggressively. “A very good thing if the fellow does think you have forgotten him. You must make up your mind to forget him,

young lady. After all I've done for you, and all the money I've spent upon you, do you suppose I'll allow you to degrade yourself and me by asking shabby, cheeky young cads to my house, and—and"— lashing himself up into fury—"having my servants opening my doors to all the riff-raff of London?"

Bee rose to her feet, her eyes flashing, her lips trembling. The old passionate temper was only scotched, not killed ; and she looked like a little fury as she said, in a voice inarticulate with anger :

"How dare you speak so of Douglas, grandfather? How *dare* you? Should I be any the better girl, do you think, if I were ungrateful enough to forget all his kindness to me in the old days? Do you know that I shall always think of him as my brother—always? and always love him better than anybody else in the world?"

Almost choking with rage, Mr. Chandler rose to his feet, upsetting his port over the table-cloth as he did so.

"What—*what!* " he shouted. " Do you

mean to tell me that you are in love with the fellow?—that you would *marry* him?"

The girl recoiled as if he had struck her. For a moment or two she stood gazing at him with wide, half-incredulous eyes. A burning flush covered her face, then receded, leaving it very white.

"Grandfather!" she said in a low, shocked voice—"oh, grandfather! No—no—no! You forget that he is my brother."

"Oh, brothers be damned!" he exclaimed furiously. "I'll warrant he has other views than figuring as a *brother* to one of the richest heiresses in England. He——"

"Stop, grandfather," she said, turning a white determined little face towards him. "One other word, and I will leave your house to-night, and never come back as long as I live. I——"

Here Mrs. Chandler, who had hitherto sat in nervous silence, broke in excitedly:

"Chandler, for pity's sake let the child alone. Don't you see you're taking the very way to make her stand up for the lad, and

think far more of him than she would do if you were quiet and sensible about it. And in the name of patience don't shout so. You'll have all the servants at the keyhole next."

"Hold your tongue, Eliza," he returned fiercely. "Am I master in my own house, or am I not?"

Nevertheless he cooled down somewhat, for he had said more than he meant to say ; and besides it suddenly occurred to him that his wife was right—he was taking the best way to make the girl think more of this inconvenient young fellow than there was any occasion for.

"Sit down, girl," he said gruffly, throwing himself into his chair again. "Sit down and don't make a fool of yourself. And let us have no more high-falutin' threats of leaving my house. If you do go—you don't come back again, mind you! Ungrateful little minx! Come here and give me a kiss. Where would you be, I'd like to know, if I hadn't lifted you out of the dirt—as one

might say—and made you as fine as the best of them? Eh? eh? Come here and kiss me, d'ye hear?"

Bee kissed him reluctantly, and then went slowly out of the room. She was conscious that she had indulged in heroics of a somewhat theatrical nature, and felt rather ashamed of her tragical outburst.

"And after all, why should I care what he says, the vulgar old creature!" she thought passionately. "Marry Douglas!—dear old Douglas! The idea!"

And, angry though she was, an irrepressible laugh broke from her soft red lips, showing that as far as Douglas was concerned she was perfectly heart-whole.

A few days later, she and Fay chanced to be in the Grosvenor Gallery. Bee was very fond of roaming through the galleries, for she was a genuine art-lover. Fay's interest in picture-galleries, on the other hand, depended entirely upon whom she might meet there—of the sterner sex, of course; for, with the exception of Bee, Miss Dinwoodie was not

given to wasting her sweetness upon her own. She openly acknowledged that she “hated pictures,” and pronounced most of our most cherished art-productions “rubbish,” showering unsparing ridicule upon the monstrosities in the way of anatomy and vegetation before which we are wont to fall into hypocritical raptures. Bee left these alone, and revelled among the works of less renowned artists, who only aim at reproducing nature as it appears to the uninitiated.

“Look, Bee,” said Fay suddenly—“isn’t that your friend Douglas Conrath? And yet—is it? Yes, it is. How much improved he is! Why, he looks almost handsome.”

Bee looked, and saw a young man, with a quiet, clever face and dark blue eyes, standing at some little distance from them. Yes, it was Douglas. His face was not much changed, save for the dark brown moustache which almost hid his mouth. Bee would have known him anywhere.

He did not see her apparently. He was standing before one of the principal pictures

of the year, jotting down notes at intervals in a small memorandum-book.

“Well, isn’t it?” said Fay impatiently.

“Yes—it is Douglas.”

“And are you not going to speak to him?”

“Yes—if he comes this way.”

Just then the young man turned, and walked slowly down the room to where the girls were standing. He saw them, and a flash of recognition passed over his face. He half-stopped; then lifted his hat gravely, and passed on.

But Fay hurried after him, and laid her hand upon his arm.

“Why, Mr. Conrath—how pleased I am to see you,” she said with her sweetest smile. “Were you really going to pass your old friends without speaking?”

He stopped then, of course, and took the little grey-gloved hand she held out to him. Then he smiled—the slow rare smile that Bee remembered so well.

“I really hardly knew you,” he said.

“ You must remember I have not seen you for very many years.”

As he spoke he turned to Bee, and for the fraction of a second her fingers rested in his.

“ Our memories are better than yours, you see,” she said with a saucy smile. “ We knew you at once.”

“ I did not say I did not know you,” he answered quietly ; “ I was speaking of Miss Dinwoodie.”

Was it the recollection of her grandfather’s ill-advised words that made Bee feel nervous and embarrassed in the presence of her old friend ? Perhaps.

“ Are you still living in that dreadful place at Westminster ? ” asked Fay, her observant brown eyes taking in every detail of the young man’s costume and general turn-out.

“ No ; I left Garth Street two years ago.”

“ Then,” said Bee quickly, “ you did not get my last three letters ? ”

“ I have not had any letters from you for more than a year,” he said in somewhat curt tones.

“Where are you living now?” put in Fay in her quick decided voice.

“In Guilford Street, Bloomsbury,” he answered. “I daresay you will think that only a degree less ‘dreadful’ than Garth Street.”

“And what have you been doing, Douglas?” said Bee, who had recovered her self-possession by this time and dismissed her grandfather’s insinuations as unworthy of consideration. “You are looking thin and tired. Have you been working very hard?”

“No,” he answered lightly, “I have not been working hard at all. And I’m afraid my doings, such as they are, would not be at all interesting to either you or Miss Dinwoodie.”

“I remember you used to write, long ago—for the magazines, I mean. Do you ever write anything now?” said Bee, feeling somehow that Douglas and she had drifted very far away from each other.

“A little,” he replied evasively.

“I never see any of your articles,” observed Fay in a disapproving voice. “I

hope you are not one of these dreadfully clever young men," she added earnestly. "I shall be so disappointed if you are. You don't *look* a bit like an author."

"How ought authors to look, then, Miss Dinwoodie?" he asked, with the merest suspicion of a smile.

"Oh, well—as if they'd no brains to spare for ordinary conversation, and as if clothes, and manners, and personal niceness generally, were less than nothing to them. I mean male authors of course. I've never met any female ones."

"But, Fay," said Bee laughing, "I didn't know you had met any authors at all. When did you?"

"The night before last, when mother and I dined at Aunt Emily's. There were two of them. That man Waterbury Craven, who wrote 'Will he be Silent?' and another, I think his name was Larkspur, or something like that. He writes blank verse, I believe. I'm sure he couldn't write anything *but* blank verse—the very blankest. He had a face like

a fish, and the other was as like one of the vultures in the Zoo as he could be ; and they both looked as if their hair had never been cut since they were born. But of course there may be authors with common sense and an ordinarily decent appearance, and something to say for themselves. I don't know. Mr. Conrath," she added suddenly, " will you come and see us ? Mother is always at home on first Fridays. I'll tell her to send you a card if you will give me your address. Now don't say you never go anywhere. I know you're going to make an exception in our favour. Promise to come, and then I know you will. Bee used to say you always kept your promises."

" Yes, do, Douglas," said Bee. " I shall be there, and we can talk, you know. I have so many things to say to you."

However, Douglas did not promise. He gave his address to Fay—upon her reminding him that he had not done so—and, saying he had an engagement for which he was already late, he went away.

“I like your Douglas, do you know,” said Fay reflectively, as they walked up Bond Street a quarter of an hour or so later. “He is rather distinguished-looking, and he *has* such beautiful eyes.”

“He always had dear, kind, true eyes,” Bee said in a doubtful sort of voice, “but I don’t know about their being beautiful. They are just Douglas’s eyes to me, you know,” she added—“not like any one else’s.”

“Well, at any rate, he is a nice fellow—a very nice fellow, and I shall see that mother sends him a card,” returned Fay decidedly. “He looks like a *man*—a real man. All the men I’ve met since I came home look for all the world like so many well-dressed gentlemanly oysters.”

“What, your cousin Cyril too?” said Bee in a mischievous voice. “You used to consider him rather a demi-god, surely?”

“Oh, Cyril is all very well—but he is a kind of oyster too. I daresay he may develop a pearl or two in time. He hasn’t yet. The world has treated him too well.”

After all Douglas did put in an appearance at the Dinwoodies' on the following Friday, having received a card intimating that Lady Dinwoodie would be "at home" from four to seven on that day.

The rooms were pretty well filled when he got there, and it was some time before he caught sight of Fay, who, in a bewildering and "fetching" gown of some pale blue stuff, was sustaining a sharp running fire of repartee with a group of irreproachably expressionless young men. When she saw Douglas, she came forward at once with a pleased smile.

"So good of you to come," she said cordially. "I was afraid you wouldn't. Come and let me introduce you to my mother."

Lady Dinwoodie received him with moderate civility. Her manner, indeed, was apt to be chilly to those from whose acquaintance no benefit, social or otherwise, was to be gained. Douglas, for his part, had never felt less inclined to make himself agreeable.

When he had exchanged a couple of stiff remarks with his hostess, he stood silent, erect, and with a somewhat bitter smile on his lips, while she sailed away to greet fresh arrivals. Fay was conversing gaily with a fat old duchess, who really looked not unlike Mrs. Chandler. Everybody was talking and laughing, interchanging greetings with those they knew, or being introduced to those they did not know. Douglas felt he had been a fool to come ; he knew nobody, and nobody wanted to know him. Bee was evidently not there.

Just then he saw her. She was standing in one of the windows with Sir Cyril Northburgh. The latter was looking rather less bored than usual, and was evidently listening with interest to what his companion was saying. She was looking very pretty. As Douglas looked at the slender girlish figure, at the sweet innocent face that mingled the freshness of childhood with a new quaint dignity, he fell into a reverie — a reverie which showed him such a different Bee—a

Bee in shabby frocks and doubtful shoes—a Bee whose world was bounded by the little attic-room in Garth Street, who——

“How are you, Douglas?” said the voice of Bee herself. “So you came after all. I am so glad. I think you have met Sir Cyril Northburgh,” she added.

Both men bowed slightly. Neither, it appeared, had any recollection of having met before.

Presently Sir Cyril moved away, and Bee said hurriedly :

“Come into the other room, Douglas. There are fewer people there, and we can talk. I know Granny is looking for me. We are going to some man’s studio to see his pictures. Let us sit down here. It seems so very, very long since I talked to you. Do you know I thought you quite stiff to me at the Grosvenor the other day? And I’m sure if Fay hadn’t stopped you, you wouldn’t have spoken to us. I suppose you never even thought of coming to see me, though I wrote to tell you I had come home.”

“ You forget,” he said slowly. “ I did not get your letters—latterly.”

“ Ah, well, never mind now. Tell me all you are doing. Have you—are you in any——”

“ Any situation ? ” he said in a quiet voice. “ Yes. I am secretary to an old gentleman of the name of Redman, and my salary has been lately raised to £150 a year. Do you think, Bee, that your grandfather will care to acknowledge the acquaintance of such an insignificant young man ? Don’t you think we had better agree to—drop out of each other’s lives in the meantime ? ” His voice was gentle enough, but it held a slightly ironical inflection which Bee was quick to notice.

“ Why, Douglas——” she said reproachfully. “ But of course you don’t mean that. As for grandfather, one can always tell the kind of young men *he* will care to acknowledge the acquaintance of ”—this with an impatient toss of her compact little head. “ Rich young men—titled young men—successful young

men—any kind of young men whose friendship will add to the glorification of Joseph Chandler. Do you know," she added with infinite scorn, "that he calls himself *Chandleur* now, with the accent on the last syllable? Oh, he is insufferable! If it is a crime to hate one's grandfather, I am a most hardened and unrepentant criminal. If you knew, Douglas, how I used to dread coming home for the holidays, just because of grandfather. Granny isn't so bad — poor granny! — for though she is vulgar, she doesn't pretend to be anything else; but grandfather! — he is *impossible!* And then his conversation— always about how he became rich, or about what he calls 'swells'—and their entertainments. As for taking the slightest interest in anything either political or literary or scientific, why, he would never think of it. There is not a book in the house, except the calf-bound volumes that furnish the library, and which have never been opened. Of course I have my own books. I don't know what I should do without them. Grandfather

thinks women shouldn't read anything but the Bible and Blair's sermons, and little silly tales fit for children. I believe he thinks Ruskin is a novelist, and Carlyle a successful writer of burlesques, and has a vague idea that George Eliot was a comic actor," she added with a naughty laugh.

"Nevertheless he has been kind to you, Bee," said Douglas. "Are you not a little hard upon him?"

"Perhaps I am," she admitted. "And after all I am not a fixture at Portland Place. I suppose I shall be married one of these days. I sometimes think I shall marry the first unobjectionable suitor who presents himself. No man *could* be worse to live with than grandfather."

"Good God! child — don't say such horrible things," said the young man hastily. "You don't know what you're talking about. Of course I have no right to advise you, or to take exception to anything you may say; but if you knew what sacrilege it seems——"

He stopped, and bit his lip with a sudden frown.

“Why, Douglas, I was only joking,” she said laughing. “And why should you not lecture me if you want to? You were not always so ceremonious. Ah, dear me, I sometimes wish I were back again in dear old Garth Street. I remember it so well—so well.”

He looked down at her with a half-smile.

“Ah, Bee, you have grown out of Garth Street, my dear.”

They talked for quite a long time after that—so long, indeed, that Bee forgot all about her grandmother, who finally came to look for her in rather a bad temper.

“For the horses have been standing there for the last couple of hours, Katharine; and you know nothing makes your grandfather so wild. What did you say? Mr. Conrath? Oh, how are you, Mr. Conrath? I shouldn’t have known you, I’m sure. Good afternoon. Do come away, child.”

Douglas remained standing where they had

left him. Someone was singing. It was an old, old song, with a quaint, curiously monotonous refrain, and the singer—who did not disdain to let the words be intelligible to her hearers—rendered it most exquisitely. It carried the young man back—back to his early boyhood ; for it was a song he had often heard his mother sing. For a moment or two he seemed to see the surging, gaily-dressed crowd though a heavy mist ; then the mist cleared away, and Fay Dinwoodie stood beside him.

“How sad you look !” she said softly.

“Do I ?” he answered in a strange voice. “I daresay I do. I was thinking of something sad.”

“How different you are from most men,” she said slowly, after a minute. “You don’t know how refreshing it is, for one thing, to see men talk without a smile.”

He was smiling now, however.

“Has your knowledge of my unhappy sex been gained during the last few weeks ?” he asked.

“Why, no, of course not. You forget that, except this last year when we were in Dresden, we have always come home at Midsummer and Christmas and Easter. And there were always men coming about, you know—at least, they called themselves men.”

Just then Sir Cyril approached them, and Douglas, who was not fond of being patronized, took his departure.



CHAPTER VIII.

“IT IS WRITTEN!”

“Life is not as the idle ore,
But ever dug from central gloom ;
And heated hot with burning fears,
And dipped in baths of hissing tears,
And battered with the shocks of doom
To shape and use.”

* * * * *

“You’ve grown acquainted with your heart,
And searched what stirred it so.
Alas ; you found it love !”

—FLETCHER.

To be twenty-seven years old, and to be only in receipt of something a little over £150 a year, with no immediate prospect of increasing that not very considerable income, is apt to cause depression under almost any circumstances. If one chances at the same time to be possessed by the restless demon of ambition, the depression may become abnormal.

Young Conrath used to feel rather down-hearted in those days. True, his work was light, though constant ; Mr. Redman was kind, and even friendly, and it was quite possible he might in time increase or even double his secretary's salary. But Douglas was not the man to plod through life upon two or three hundred a year. His mind was progressive ; his career must be progressive too. So he fretted and worried, and ate his heart out, as men do when they see their best years flitting by swiftly and relentlessly, hand-in-hand with their destiny.

He could hardly be said to have made much progress in his literary career. To be sure a stray article or short story had occasionally been accepted by one or other of the magazines, chiefly through Mr. Redman's influence. He had succeeded, too, in getting a certain obscure firm of publishers to bring out his one-volume novel (after it had travelled—during the space of three years—nearly all over London, and been re-written at least three times). He was persuaded to

pay a small sum towards the expenses thereof, with very fair promises as to the sharing of profits. It appeared, however, that there were no profits, for the book did not “sell,” was taken little notice of by the reviewers, and soon departed into that limbo which mercifully swallows up superfluous literature. The firm and its representatives presumably followed it, for one fine afternoon Douglas found the offices shut up, and a notice tacked upon the door to the effect that they were “to let.” The firm appeared shortly afterwards in the bankruptcy list, and subsequently melted away to be heard of no more. Whereupon our disgusted and indignant author fell to work upon another book, in which he so systematically “slated” the publishing profession in general that it was no wonder the MS. found its way home (like Bo Peep’s sheep) with marvellous promptitude and regularity. After this he eschewed authorship for some time.

One night, shortly after Lady Dinwoodie’s “At Home,” Douglas was dining with Mr.

Redman. The old gentleman often asked him to dine and spend the evening with him, for in his queer, rough fashion he liked his young secretary and enjoyed his conversation. He was a remarkably well-read man himself, and had long since given Douglas the run of his valuable library, a privilege which the latter was not slow to take advantage of. The young man learned much, too, from his employer's conversation and experience. Simon Redman had travelled pretty nearly all over the two hemispheres, and as he had travelled more intelligently than the average globe-trotter, his impressions were worth hearing and recording. To-night he was a less entertaining companion than usual. He spoke but little, and seemed preoccupied and ill at ease.

After dinner they adjourned, as usual, to the smoking-room, where claret and cigars awaited them. The old gentleman poured out two glasses of claret, handed Douglas a cigar and lit one for himself, then said abruptly:

"I'm going to raise your salary, Conrath. Not that I think you are underpaid, mind you! But I choose to raise it. After this you shall have two hundred."

"You are very good, sir," said Douglas quietly, as he struck a match. "I am very much obliged to you."

"Well, well," muttered the other, "that'll do. You needn't thank me."

A short silence followed, then Mr. Redman said slowly :

"Have you ever met my nephew, Maxwell Fenwicke?"

"No—never."

"He's coming here to-night," continued the old gentleman. "He's been away for seven years, travelling about, the Lord knows where, and spending money—*my* money!" This with a bang upon the table that made the glasses ring. "I suppose the money is done now—I stopped his allowance last January—and he's come home for more. I know his ways. But he will find his mistake—he will find his mistake."

“Is he a young man?” inquired Douglas somewhat abruptly—“a lad, I mean?”

“A lad? How old are you?” was the fierce answer.

“I am twenty-seven.”

“Well, Maxwell Fenwicke is thirty-three, or perhaps another year added to that. A rolling-stone—a spendthrift—a thorn in my flesh—and yet—damn it all!—I like the fellow!”

Here the door opened, and “Mr. Fenwicke” was announced. A young-looking man came into the room, who, if he was thirty-three, certainly carried his years remarkably well. He was slenderly built and very dark, with an aquiline type of face, unadorned by moustache, beard, or whiskers. The eyes were very deeply set, and held a latent twinkle. Altogether it was rather a nice face, if a little wanting in determination as regarded the mouth and chin.

“Well, uncle,” he said, in an irresistibly jovial voice, “how are you? This is a meeting now—after all these years!”

"How are you, sir?" returned his uncle with dignity. "Allow me to introduce my secretary, Mr. Douglas Conrath — a very painstaking, sensible, and, as far as I know, virtuous young fellow."

Both the younger men smiled involuntarily at this unique introduction, and with a simultaneous impulse shook hands cordially.

"Glad to meet you—glad to meet you," said the new-comer in his hearty voice. "I hope—I *hope* my respected uncle has maligned you. Ha! ha!" And he laughed gaily, and helped himself to a cigar. He looked perfectly certain of his welcome, and almost provokingly unconscious of the heavy frown upon his uncle's face. And by degrees the frown lifted, and gave way to a curious rugged smile, like the uncertain gleam of a struggling sun on grim mountains after a storm.

"I've a piece of news for you, Uncle Simon," said Fenwicke, when an hour had passed pleasantly enough. "What do you think it is?"

“Don’t know,” gruffly. “Going to be married, I suppose, and bring into the world half-a-dozen or so of scatterbrained spendthrifts like yourself—for me to keep. But I won’t do it, mind you!—I won’t do it, sir! So be warned in time.”

His nephew’s face grew suddenly grave
He filled his glass again and lit a fresh cigar
before he answered.

“No, no,” he said in a low emphatic voice. “I know I’m a fool, but I’m not such a fool as to put my head into *that* noose. No,” he added, after a minute, “my news is that an old lady, who, it appears, is—or was—my godmother, has died, and left me a small estate in the most un-get-atable place in Cornwall.”

“Ay, ay,” said Mr. Redman, with an air of interest. “What kind of place is it? Does any ready money go with it?”

“No, not a sixpence,” was the laughing answer. “I went down to see it yesterday, and found a wild, uncultivated tract of about a hundred acres, with a tumble-down house—

almost a ruin—and that's all,” he concluded good-humouredly.

“Humph!” grunted his uncle. “Then I don't see that you're much better off than you were before.”

“Well, no, neither do I,” cheerfully, “unless I could sell it. But it's not exactly the kind of place any one but a lunatic would think of buying, and that's the truth. It has a queer crackjaw name, by the way—Poldornalupe. My benefactress's name was—let me see—Emerson, I think. Yes—Emerson. So you see I have blossomed out into a real live landed proprietor, turned over a new leaf, and intend posing as a reformed character.”

“Ah!” was the uncompromising answer.

“I've another piece of news, though,” went on Fenwicke, his eyes twinkling merrily.

“Well!” in a dry voice.

“Well—I've made a little fortune in mines out there.”

“Out where?”

“Mexico,” laconically. “Bought shares. Sold them at a big profit. Made enough to

keep me from starving for a good bit, you know."

"Indeed, I'm glad to hear it. But steer clear of mines, my lad ; they're risky things —infernally risky. If you've made money, stick to it. I've been bitten with mining fever myself, and—— There, I'm tired"—the speaker broke off suddenly. "Good-night to you both. Where are you staying, Max?"

"I've taken rooms in Charles Street—convenient, you know. Good-night, uncle ; I'll look you up in a day or two."

Douglas rose to say good-night also, and he and Fenwicke went out together.

"Look here," said the latter genially as they stood in the street in the fair spring moonlight, "it's not late ; come up to my rooms and have a pipe. Unless you've any other engagement," he added.

As Douglas had no other engagement, and as he had taken rather a liking to this odd young man, he went ; and they sat talking and smoking until far into the small hours.

It was a new and pleasant experience for Douglas ; for, with the exception of old Simon Redman, he had no friends, and since the days when he and Ralph Debenham had talked in the little room at Garth Street he had never felt impelled to talk of himself, or his thoughts and aspirations. To-night he surprised himself by talking to Fenwicke as if he had known him all his life. Fenwicke was a capital listener, and in spite of his off-hand, careless manner, he had a way of drawing out confidences from those around him.

Thus they talked, not knowing that it was written in the book of fate that henceforth their lives were to be closely woven together, and were to affect each other in a way neither could dream of—then.

Things happen so. We get up and go out to our daily occupations some fine morning, little thinking that we have come to a curve or a sharp corner in our destiny—that fate, in some very ordinary shape perhaps, is waiting for us silently, to make or mar all our

future comings and goings. A chance meeting; a letter; a visit; a seemingly unimportant decision for or against—and hey! presto! the whole course of our life is changed for good or evil!

“Alas! how easily things go wrong—
A sigh too deep or a kiss too long—
And then a mist and a blinding rain,
And life is never the same again.”

Yes, but things “go right” just as easily and as suddenly. To-day—within the next few hours, perhaps—the burden we have borne so long may be about to roll from our tired shoulders, leaving us to walk erect and free once more. Look up and hope, doubting heart! It is always too soon—just too soon—to despair.

That very morning Douglas had left his lodgings in a fearful fit of the blues. As he let himself in to-night he felt almost light-hearted. Two cheering things had happened to him. His salary had been raised, for one thing; and he had found a friend.



It was about six months later—long after Bee had made her curtsey to her Sovereign, and been launched into countless London gaieties. Douglas caught glimpses of her now and then, driving in her grandfather's handsomely-appointed carriage, or read her name in the lists of the guests at fashionable entertainments ; but he had only spoken to her twice—once in Bond Street, and once in Kensington Gardens. He never went to Portland Place.

It was a chilly autumn evening, then—and Douglas and Fenwicke were once more enjoying a pipe and a chat in the latter's rooms. They had become great chums by this time, and spent much of their time together.

Fenwicke was lying back in an easy chair before the fire, talking, for him, very earnestly.

“I am as certain,” he was saying, “as certain that my idea is correct as a man can be certain of anything. I tell you, Conrath, I know the indications—and I'll swear that

under that barren-looking land there is almost fabulous wealth. But what's the good?" he added, rising from his chair and walking restlessly about the room with his hands plunged deeply into his pockets. "I can't get any one else to believe it; and I can't afford to work it myself. If I had only a matter of four hundred or so, I might make a beginning. But as it is—I'm helpless."

"I suppose it would be no use applying to your uncle?" said Douglas, after a pause.

The other shook his head.

"No," he said decidedly. "Besides, I fancy he has dropped a lot himself lately. I don't know in what, but he hinted as much to me."

"Yes, I know," was the brief answer.

"I don't want to borrow the money either"—went on Fenwicke, "even if I knew any one who would lend it to me—which I don't. And as for getting any one to go in with a scheme to find mineral anywhere nearer than Australia, or Mexico, or Spain—why, you might as well try to organize a scheme for a

submarine route to — to Paradise. Everybody seems to think that any mineral to be found in Cornwall has been found long ago. And, indeed, I used to think so myself."

Douglas was smoking thoughtfully.

"I wish to Heaven I had the money," he said with a quick, impatient sigh. "We might go into the thing together."

"I daresay, old fellow," rejoined the other, slapping him affectionately on the shoulder. "But if I didn't know you were as hard up as—as I am myself, I should never have mentioned the matter to you. And as a matter of fact I am most deucedly hard up. Jove! it's marvellous how money melts away! Six months ago I could have taken my oath I'd never be on the rocks again. And now—upon my soul I'm at my wits' end to know how to raise the wind. I'm afraid I shall have to forswear my anti-matrimonial intentions and look out for an heiress—only I don't happen to know any heiresses." And he laughed somewhat ruefully.

Now, why did his words and his tone jar

upon his companion? And why did a quick thought of Bee flash through Douglas's mind, coupled with some careless words he had heard her utter only a few months ago? He puffed at his pipe in silence, however; and presently Fenwicke was in full swing once more upon the inexhaustible subject of his Cornish property.

Douglas sat staring into the fire. He was revolving a project in his own mind. Suppose he were to write a successful novel—at last? Suppose he received from £400 to 500 for it? Why not? It was not impossible. Suppose he became a partner in this scheme, and that not only fame but fortune awaited him? His pulses beat quickly, feverishly. All at once a possible plot for his novel rushed across his brain. Whole scenes flashed into vivid life and reality; whole pages of dialogue rose up before him; the cosy firelit room seemed to recede into indefinite space; and Fenwicke's voice sounded far away and indistinct, like a half-heard voice in a dream. For the time the author's soul was in an enchanted

world—a world where he was a providence and a creator to all the creatures of his imagination, making them move and think and act according to his will.

He was aroused by the sudden cessation of Fenwicke's voice, and the somewhat noisy opening of the door.

It was a servant, bearing a telegram for Fenwicke. The latter opened it, and a moment later uttered a dismayed exclamation

“By Jove! I say, Conrath,” he said agitatedly—“my poor uncle—he is dying! He wants to see me. There is no time to lose. Will you come with me? Good God! ——*dying!* I didn't know he was ill. I didn't know he had come up from Sunningdale. Did you?”

He was halfway downstairs by this time, and Douglas was mechanically following him. In less than three minutes both men had flung themselves into a hansom, and were whirling rapidly towards Lancaster Gate.

Mr. Redman was alive, the man who

opened the door informed them with decorous gravity ; but the doctors said he could not live more than a few hours at most. It was acute internal inflammation, he added, the result of a sudden chill. Mr. Redman had come home last night complaining of feeling ill, and had gone to bed immediately.

Fenwicke went upstairs at once. His uncle seemed pleased to see him, and pressed his hand feebly.

“ Glad you were in time, my boy,” he said with a quivering smile. Then he added brokenly, “ I always meant to—to do something for you, Max—when my time came. But—I didn’t think it would be so—so soon, and so sudden—and I’ve lost—a good deal of money lately. When everything’s settled there won’t be—much left. And—I have claims on me that—that few know of. You’ll have—a hundred a year. Not the principal, Max—not the principal”—this with a grim twinkle in his fast-fading eyes. “ It would go—all in a sweep. And see that— young Conrath has—a year’s salary. That’s all, I

think. Shake hands, Max. I've been gruff at times—but you're a nice lad—a nice lad—if you had more ballast. Perhaps—it'll come, though.”

He never spoke after that; and half-an-hour later turned his face to the wall, and died.

His nephew went down to the dining-room, where Douglas stood leaning his elbow on the mantelshelf, gazing down into the dying fire. He looked up quickly as Fenwicke entered. Neither spoke for a few minutes. Then Fenwicke said huskily :

“He's gone. He—didn't suffer much. He was a decent, good-hearted old fellow—God rest his soul.”

Then there was another silence.

* * * * *

When the two friends had parted, nearly an hour later, Douglas walked slowly along Oxford Street, until he came to Regent Circus. Then by some unconscious impulse, he turned to the left, and walked northward.

He felt shocked and bewildered at the

terribly sudden death of his eccentric old friend—and sincerely grieved as well. For he had been a kind, good friend to him in many ways—a friend he was not likely to replace. And he was now cast adrift once more.

Well!—you may say—surely it ought to be easy enough for a man of twenty-seven, with average address and abilities, to find another post of the same kind as the one he had just lost? Yes, I suppose it ought to be easy enough. But like most other possibilities containing the word “ought,” the chances in this particular possibility have a way of becoming baffling and illusive when called upon for active service.

To do Douglas justice, however, his thoughts to-night were more of the actual loss of his friend than of its consequences. He could hardly realize that the gruff yet kindly voice was for ever silent, the busy active brain at rest. It was so fearfully sudden, so unlooked for. The old gentleman had gone down into the country for a day or

two and had not been expected home until this evening. He had written to Douglas in good spirits and apparently good health only a couple of days ago. Ah, well ! he had gone home, indeed !

Perhaps it was not strange that in his musings Douglas should turn his steps towards Portland Place. He often passed by that way, making long *détours* to do so. A carriage stood at the Chandlers' door, the horses champing their bits monotonously. It was a still, clear night, and the hour of eleven shivered up from Westminster. When he was within a dozen paces or so from the carriage, Douglas stood still for a few moments, under the pretext of lighting a cigar. As he struck his second match, a girl, radiant in shimmering satin, half-concealed by the fur-trimmed wrap she wore, came lightly down the steps. A young man came immediately behind her, with a stout old lady upon his arm. The light of the street lamp fell full upon their faces—the girl's, so fresh and fair and gay—the man's, colourless and aristocratic.

cratic and impassive—the old woman's, fat and unconcerned. In getting into the carriage the girl's foot slipped, and she would have fallen, had not the young man, with a swift movement, put his arm about her. He bent over her, for a second or two, with a few murmured anxious words.

A swift, raging, hitherto unknown passion of jealousy tore through the heart of the unseen watcher—a passion so overwhelming in its intensity, and so full of fierce, intolerable agony, that he turned sick and giddy, and leaned blindly against the railings for support.

He heard the carriage drive past him—he even heard Bee's low laugh float out upon the night in answer to some brief words from Sir Cyril. They did not see him, of course, as he stood there in his bewildered newly-awakened pain. They were not even thinking of him. Why should they?

A few moments later he found himself walking with a quick steady step in the direction of Regent's Park. His face, when

the lamp-light now and then fell upon it, was very pale, and his eyes held a wild, half-incredulous misery that was strange to them.

He had “grown acquainted with his heart” indeed, and the knowledge was bitter.



CHAPTER IX.

THE THAWING OF AN ICEBERG.

“ She had
A heart—how shall I say ?—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed ; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her ; but who passed without
Much the same smile ? ”

—ROBERT BROWNING.

IT was generally understood that Sir Cyril Northburgh was paying marked attention to Miss Adeane. And, as a matter of fact, the young man in question was as far gone as a man of his cool temperament could well be.

By the way, I am not at all sure that these apparently cool and unemotional individuals are by any means so cool and unemotional as they look. I have known some of them, upon occasion, disclose possibilities of fire and passion absolutely appalling. This, however, as I have said, by the way. If Sir Cyril had

any such proclivities, he kept them well in hand, and presented a particularly successful *sang-froid* on all occasions, even when a little of the other thing might have been expected or condoned.

Bee and Fay made fun of his calm, self-satisfied ways, to be sure, as girls will; but they liked him: Fay, as a cousin who was always at hand to be ordered about, confided in, and made use of generally; Bee, as a good-natured and reliable friend. But it had certainly never occurred to the latter to marry him. For one thing, he had not asked her to marry him; and she was not the girl to construe a man's intentions matrimonially until they had been put into plain words. She would have missed him a good deal if he had dropped out of her life just then, and, in a way, she was dimly conscious of this. For his part, he doubtless knew the wisdom of making himself indispensable to her, without—as yet—sounding the depths of her maiden heart.

Mr. Chandler—or, as I suppose we must

now call him, Mr. *Chandleur*—approved of the young baronet's intentions. That is to say he approved of them in the meantime. If any wealthier or higher-born suitor turned up—why, Joseph Chandleur was not such a laggard in fashionable ways as to hesitate about whistling the gallant Cyril “down the wind” without the slightest compunction.

Lady Northburgh, however, was not altogether sure that she approved of her son's attentions to Miss Adeane. She disliked the “Chandleurs,” and could not be induced either to visit or be visited by them. But, as her sister somewhat severely impressed upon her, “the boy” might do worse—far worse.

“My dear Emily,” she said one day when the sisters were returning from a round of calls (Lady Dinwoodie found her sister's carriage very convenient upon occasion, and did not scruple to make extensive use of it)—“my dear Emily, I think the boy has shown very good taste, and an uncommon amount of good sense as well. Why the girl's fortune will be enormous, if all I hear is true—simply

enormous. And she is well-bred, and not bad-looking—if not exactly a beauty. Really when one contemplates the shocking *mésalliances* that some of our young men seem to take a pleasure in making now-a-days, you ought to sing hymns of praise—I think. As far as I can see, the aristocracy of the future will be the offspring of a parcel of barmaids, ballet-dancers and cooks — or worse.”

“I do so wish he and Fay had cared for each other,” murmured Sir Cyril’s mother plaintively.

“Well, yes—I don’t mind acknowledging that I was disappointed there too,” was the frank answer. “I am very fond of Cyril, and I have no absurd fancies about cousins not marrying. But Cyril doesn’t care at all for Fay in that way—any more than she does for him. So it can’t be helped. I wish I saw her safely married. She is young enough, of course ; but I feel horribly certain that she will take a fancy to some quite impossible young man, and marry him.

in spite of all I can do. She is so self-willed and headstrong."

"After all," said Lady Northburgh hopefully, "Cyril may change his mind."

"*Emily!*" was the exasperated answer—"upon my word you deserve to wake up some fine morning to find your son has married your cook. You do indeed."

Her sister smiled, and smoothed her well-fitting gloves pensively.

"I am not afraid of that," she murmured. "My cook is fifty if she is a day, and she is the ugliest woman I ever saw in my life."

Lady Dinwoodie sighed impatiently. There was no doing anything with Emily.

* * * * *

Cyril himself, meanwhile, was partaking of afternoon tea (a beverage he detested) in the Chandleurs' drawing-room.

Mr. Chandleur was in great form to-day, for on the previous evening he had exchanged a brace of sentences with his future Sovereign, and was therefore blatantly conscious that he had not lived in vain. He was standing with

his legs very far apart, and his head held very far back, as he recounted to a comparatively new acquaintance the oft-told story of the accumulation of his millions. In his excitement he forgot to alternately foster and suppress his H's, and relapsed into all his old cockneyisms. An expression of bland contempt stole over his listener's countenance, but he did not see it. But Bee saw it, and she also saw the faint quiver of a smile under Cyril Northburgh's blond moustache. The smile irritated her. Her grandfather's solecisms in pronunciation, in etiquette, and various other matters did not amuse her at all ; they only roused in her a painful sense of humiliation.

Cyril's smile was brief ; for he was quick to see the frown that crossed his lady's expressive little face. He moved to a seat close to the tea-equipage, and said in his most conciliatory tones :

“ May I have some tea ? ”

“ Some more ? ” was the somewhat cross answer. “ Why, Cyril, you have had three

cups. And surely it was only yesterday you told me that you hated tea?"

"Did I?" he replied with unabashed serenity. "Very likely. But since then my medical adviser has prescribed tea—tea in large quantities."

"Well, there isn't any more," observed Bee, who had been looking into the teapot. "And I'm not going to ring to have more made, because I saw you make the most dreadful face as you were finishing your last cup. And as for your medical adviser!—I don't believe you ever had anything the matter with you in your life," she added scornfully.

He laughed in his usual lazy fashion.

"Oh, yes, I have," he said, pulling the ears of Mrs. Chandleur's pug, who was investigating his boots with interest. "I had measles when I was a lad—and very badly too; and I had typhoid fever not so very many years ago. And just now," he added in a whimsical way he had when he felt a good deal—"just now I've got another kind

of fever—the sort of fever a fellow has if—his heart's affected."

"Poor thing!" she said mockingly. "Is it very bad?"

"Very," was the grave answer. "Keeps me from sleeping at nights, don't you know, and takes away my appetite for everything—except tea."

Bee was looking at him with a curious expression, half-wistful, half-contemptuous, in her clear grey eyes.

"Cyril," she said slowly, "don't you think it is a great pity that you—who really could be sensible and interesting if you liked—should always talk in that chaffing, meaningless way—as if you had no ideas, and no brains, and no heart at all?"

He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"How do you know I have any of these commodities?" he said nonchalantly.

Nevertheless, there was a shade more colour in his handsome face than usual; and his eyes lost their sleepy look and became half-amused, half-resentful.

“Well — certainly neither your conversation nor your appearance would suggest as much,” was the sharp and not very polite answer.

“Oh, thanks very much,” he said with a satirical bow. Then he added in an exasperatingly calm and dispassionate kind of way, “Don’t you think that was rather rude?”

Bee flushed painfully ; but she looked mutinous and unrepentant, and busied herself in crumbling a biscuit into her empty teacup.

After a minute or so Cyril said, leaning slightly forward, and absolutely forgetting to caress his moustache in his earnestness :

“Is it always fair, Bee, do you think, to judge altogether from outward impressions? — or in any case to judge so hardly? Did it never strike you that in some cases a man may affect to feel little or nothing, because, as a matter of fact, he is afraid of showing—that he feels too much? ”

“No,” she made answer, with all the severity of youth. “I don’t see why people

should pretend to feel more or less than they do feel. Why should they? Why not be honest and true? I despise pretence and affectation."

"Do you despise me too?" said Cyril in a curious voice.

Just then Bee's attention was claimed by a young military Adonis of imposing proportions, whose income, which was small, was in exact inverse ratio to his expenditure, which was large—and who, therefore, looked with favourable eyes upon old Chandleur's presumptive heiress. Cyril breathed a silent imprecation concerning this gallant youth's future, and crossed the room to speak to the newest society beauty, Mrs. Osgood Graves. But, as a quaint and witty playwright has put it, "the goods were all in the shop-window." The beauty had been born without brains. She soon palled upon Sir Cyril, who rather affected brains, in moderation—and in conjunction with beauty of course. No man will stand brains alone in a woman. That is his own prerogative.

Cyril did not see Bee again until a few evenings later. It was at a crowded dance at Mrs. Osgood Graves', and Cyril, having patiently elbowed his way up that lady's staircase, and greeted, perforce, all the acquaintances he particularly desired to avoid, found himself borne onwards up the long, brilliantly-lighted rooms until he at last caught sight of Miss Adeane, who vouchsafed him the smallest and chilliest of bows. She was talking with much animation to a rather sad-looking man of perhaps forty, or upwards, whose grey hair contrasted curiously with his dark eyes and eyebrows and brown moustache.

“Who the devil is the fellow?” thought Cyril in the enraged depths of his heart. “By Jove! one would think she had known him from childhood. I would give fifty pounds to know what she is saying to him.”

As a matter of fact, this was what Bee was saying: -

“Do you know that we are old friends, Mr. Debenham?”

“Are we?” he made answer in a puzzled voice. “Surely not. I hardly think I should have forgotten you.”

“Think,” she said gravely—“think far, far back—ten, eleven years ago?”

He shook his head.

“I can’t forgive myself; but I’m afraid my memory must be treacherous,” he said. “Besides—eleven years ago! Why——”

“Don’t you remember,” she went on in a slow, contemplative way, “being very kind, once upon a time, to a little girl who lived in a small street in Westminster, called Garth Street? Don’t you remember a boy called Douglas Conrath, who——?”

“Ah!” he interrupted her, with a sudden light of puzzled comprehension in his grey eyes. “But——why, it is not possible that you are his sister?—that you are little Bee? Oh, no—of course it is out of the question.”

“Yes—I am little Bee,” she said in a low voice, which seemed to her hearer to hold a ring of regret. “At least—I was—once.”

“And—your brother—Douglas?” he

asked, still looking surprised and somewhat bewildered. “I met him the other day, and he did not——” He stopped, and then went on: “Is he here to-night?”

She made a little negative gesture; then said sadly:

“He is not my brother—now.”

“I don’t quite understand,” he said, in his slow, gentle voice.

“Then listen, and I will tell you,” she said.

He listened attentively while she told him how she had been taken away from her adopted brother, how she was no longer Bee Conrath, but Bee Adeane, and how she and Douglas met but seldom.

“You say you saw him—lately?” she said with a wistful upward look.

“Yes, I saw him some days ago, but only for a few moments,” he answered.

“Ah!” — quickly. “And did he seem well?—happy?”

Debenham paused for a minute; then he said:

“No; I did not think he seemed either well or—happy.”

The girl’s eyes fell, and when she raised them again they were misty with tears.

“I hardly ever see him,” she said in a tremulous voice. “He seems to avoid me—or not to care to see me—now.”

“I think you misjudge him,” her companion made answer gravely. “I am afraid the world has not been using him well of late, and—misfortunes make a man something of a hermit, you know.”

“Why?” she asked. “If I were unfortunate, I think I should be more inclined than ever to turn to the companionship of my friends.”

“Ah!” he said, with a strange little smile, “but that is one of the curses of misfortune—one doubts the possibility of having any friends at all. Adversity, for the most part, falls like a blight upon all love and friendship, misconstrues every action, magnifies every slight, and kills all sense of charity and goodwill. I know,” he added with an almost

intense earnestness, “because I have experienced adversity myself—more than one kind of adversity. And very hard lines I found it—and very badly I bore it. It is over now—thank God!—but I don’t think I could ever forget its bitterness.”

He sighed as he spoke, and pushed his hair back from his forehead with a gesture of weariness.

After a minute Bee said in a low voice:

“Did Douglas tell you if—if he were unhappy, or if he had been unfortunate in any way?”

“There are some things that do not need telling,” he answered evasively. “Besides, I only spoke a few words with him.”

“Did he—did he speak of me?”

“No. At least, I asked him if you were well, and he said you were. That was all.”

All this time Cyril Northburgh was steadfastly regarding Bee and her companion from a distant doorway. Outwardly, he was calmly indifferent to all around him, as usual. Inwardly, he was consumed with rage and

jealousy. At last he sauntered across the room, and took up an assured position at Bee's side. She was just presenting Debenham with a flower from the bunch on her bodice.

“For the sake of old times,” Cyril heard her murmur.

“How do you do, Miss Adeane? Have you a dance to spare for me?” he said in the peculiarly distinct and clear tones he always adopted when in a passion—which, to do him justice, was not often.

“I’m afraid you are too late,” she replied with an adorable smile. “I see granny making wild signs to me across the room. We are going on, you know—to Lady Bilberry’s crush. I suppose we shall see you there?”

“I thought of going for an hour,” he said stiffly. “May I take you to Mrs. Chandleur?” he added, if possible, more stiffly still.

“No, thank you. Mr. Debenham was just going to take me to her when you came up.

Au revoir," this with a gay little wave of her fan. "I shall see you shortly, I suppose."

Cyril replied by an icy bow. He too had quite intended "going on" to Lady Bilberry's crush, but with a determination much to be admired, he resolved to forego that pleasure, and spent the rest of the night at the Junior Carlton, in a most unholy temper. You see, he had made up his mind to propose to Bee that night; nay, I may go further, and say that he had made up his mind to become engaged to her that night. And the little minx's calm ignoring of his prospective rights (for *of course*, he argued, she must be aware of his intentions!), and her maddening familiarity with the unknown "fellow" piqued him inexpressibly.

* * * * *

And Douglas? Well, Douglas had written another novel, and three publishers had refused it—in those relentlessly courteous terms that sear the souls of would-be authors. Wherefore our author consigned the work of many feverish weeks to the flames, and opened

his gates to Giant Despair. For his money was becoming unpleasantly scarce, and he had not yet found a successor to kind, eccentric old Simon Redman.

So the months ran on, and it was now October. One cold, wet night, when he was feeling particularly wretched, and physically ill besides, he found himself, he hardly knew how, writing swiftly and mechanically. The crowding thoughts flowed from his pen with hardly any effort of will. His characters moved, and spoke, and acted, like living responsible creatures. He wrote, for the first time, from his heart—for *himself*—with no thought of the Argus-eyed British public, no thought of any audience at all. He wrote without conscious conception, without pauses for contemplation of the pros and cons which usually worried him. He wrote steadily, and with few interruptions, for three days and nights. It seemed as if a fever possessed him. Sleep was impossible to him, food a nauseous necessity.

On the morning of the fourth day he wrote

the last few words, threw down his pen, and rested his head on his hand. Oh, God!—how his temples throbbed and burned!—how his pulses leapt and quivered! He felt utterly exhausted—worn out in mind and body. Presently he rose, and rolled up the manuscript in feverish haste. A reckless determination took possession of him to send it off as it stood--without any of the conscientious corrections and revisals which as a rule he considered imperative.

“Let it sink or swim,” he muttered savagely, “I do not care. It is nothing to me.”

Ah! but he did care; and it was a great deal to him; and the days that followed were weary, weary waiting. His heart used to beat up to his throat like any nervous girl’s as he listened for the postman’s knock day by day and night by night, and at each fresh disappointment it sank in impotent misery and resentment.

And it came to pass at last, between anxiety, and actual want, and keeping at bay

his hopeless love for Bee, that he fell ill, and became a prey to a nervous wasting fever, which brought him pretty near death's door.

Max Fenwicke nursed him through the worst of it, and one day when his patient was very far through, took upon himself to despatch a little note to Miss Adeane. For Douglas in his feverish wanderings had partly betrayed his secret, and Max was rather an adept at the old, old sum of putting two and two together.

It was a bitterly cold, foggy night. Egyptian darkness prevailed outside, and even indoors the fog seemed to steal in and permeate all things. Douglas's room, half bedroom, half sitting-room, was at no time a cheerful apartment. To-night—by the light of the one flaring candle—it looked inexpressibly dreary. The fire had burned low, for Fenwicke, tired out with many nights of watching, had fallen asleep; dust lay thick over everything, and a general air of indescribable confusion prevailed in the room.

The doctor had this morning pronounced his patient out of danger, and assured him cheerily that he would certainly “pull through” now. The patient himself felt that his “pulling through” was a matter of indifference to himself, and possibly to every one else. He turned over with a heavy groan, and raised himself painfully on his elbow. Yes—the room looked very dreary, and he felt weak and ill to wretchedness. Besides, he was able to think consecutively now, and knew what this illness would cost him. He knew he must have been ill for at least nearly a fortnight ; and, as far as he could recollect, he had been able to count his shillings on one hand on the last day he remembered anything. Then he thought of his book. How had it fared ? Had it been returned, like its predecessor ? or had it been accepted ? Or, what was more than likely, was the old weary waiting going on still ? Then he thought of Bee, and fell back upon his pillows with a long shivering sigh. Max stirred and sat up, rubbing his eyes vigorously.

“Awake, old fellow?” he said in his cheery voice. “Feeling better, eh?”

The other shook his head. Then after a minute he said faintly :

“Max—have any letters come—for me?”

“Only one,” was the prompt answer. “Here it is—square envelope, crest, and all the rest of it.”

“Ah!” Douglas said in a tone of bitter disappointment. “You can open it.”

It was only a card of invitation for a dance at Lady Dinwoodie’s, and Max fitted it carefully into its envelope again, affecting not to see the other’s quivering lips and tightly-clenched fingers. A little later he said :

“Look here, old fellow, I’m going out to get a paper. Is there anything you could fancy? Oysters—jelly—fruit—or anything of that kind?”

But Douglas turned away with a gesture of repulsion ; and presently Max took up his hat and went out.

The sick man lay quite still for a time, one

thin hand pressed closely over his eyes as though to shut out the light—listening wearily to the monotonous ticking of the rickety clock upon the mantelpiece. The little insect we call the “death-watch” was also ticking fiercely from behind an old picture in one corner. To Douglas’s sick fancy they seemed running a steady race. But the death-watch was always ahead. He felt horribly weak—as if he were gradually sinking away into nothingness; then a sick, deathlike faintness came over him and wrapped him in unconsciousness.

The opening of the door did not rouse him, and it closed again without his having opened his eyes. Then, all at once, his senses awoke.

Some one was bending over him; a faint odour of violets enfolded him; a soft tremulous voice whispered his name. He uncovered his eyes and looked up with a start. A dim idea that he had died came over him, and that in another world the love had come to him that could never come in

this. He tried to smile—to murmur some words of greeting ; then all was darkness.

When he came to himself again his dream had not vanished. Bee was there still.

He half-raised himself on one arm.

“ Bee ! ” he whispered. “ *Is it Bee ? I am not dreaming, then, or dead ? But, my dearest,* ” with a troubled contraction of his brows, “ how did you come here ? I don’t—understand. It is not a place for you—and—”

“ Hush ! ” she interrupted him, laying her cool little fingers over his lips. “ Why did you not let me know sooner that you were ill ? It was unkind of you.”

Her words floated through his brain without conveying much meaning to him. He was feeling strangely faint and giddy, and presently he turned his head towards the fireplace, where a man’s figure was leaning against the mantelpiece—the face in deep shadow.

“ Is that you, Fenwicke ? ” he said feebly. “ You might give me—a little—water.”

But it was not Fenwicke who answered.

“Can I do anything for you?” said a rather chilly voice—Cyril Northburgh’s voice, in fact.

The speaker came slowly forward, with an expression of disapprobation and reluctance about his whole personality which he could not for the life of him have helped.

Conrath looked weakly bewildered.

“You—Sir Cyril?” he said, looking from him to Bee uncertainly. Then a sudden comprehension cut through his heart and held him dumb.

“I am sorry to see you looking so ill,” observed Sir Cyril (without, however, looking in the least sorry). “I must apologise for intruding upon you in this way; but Miss Adeane had heard of your illness, and—er—was anxious—er—to come.”

“It was very good of her,” murmured poor Douglas, with a sickening certainty that Sir Cyril’s presence there could only mean one thing.

“Let me give you a little water,” went on

Cyril in his cool, even tones. “Stay—I will raise your head a little.” As he spoke he deftly passed his arm under the other’s head, and held a glass of water to his lips. He could hardly have done less, to be sure ; but Bee’s eyes more than thanked him.

Something in her old friend’s haggard, worn face, and a certain wistful look in his sunken eyes as Cyril gently laid him down again, touched some latent cord in her tender little heart, and the next moment she had burst into passionate weeping.

Douglas flushed painfully, and Cyril bit his well-cut lips with annoyance. But Bee cried on most heartily for a minute or two ; then, just as Cyril was saying in a low suppressed voice, “Bee, for Heaven’s sake try to compose yourself,” she stopped almost as suddenly as she had begun.

But to Douglas her tears were sweet. Her lover had not entirely ousted her childhood’s friend, then ? She was the old, impulsive, loving Bee still !

“I couldn’t help it,” she said, with a

piteous little smile, as she dried her eyes. “ You look so ill, Douglas, my dear, and so—so lonely,” and she squeezed one of his hands tenderly.

Sir Cyril glanced at his watch, and then said coldly :

“ Are you ready to go now, Bee ? I am sure when Mr. Conrath knows that you are here against your grandfather’s wishes——” He paused and settled his collar irritably.

“ Sir Cyril is right, Bee,” said Douglas in a very quiet voice. “ You ought not to have come. Go now. Do not keep him waiting.”

“ Oh, Cyril doesn’t mind,” she answered carelessly. “ Why, he brought me. When I heard two days ago that you were so very ill —(no, I shall not tell you *how* I heard)—I was so terribly grieved and miserable that I wanted to rush off with granny at once to nurse you. But grandfather found out that we were coming, and of course there was the usual scene. To-night is the only time he has been out of the house since. (He *had* to go

to some dinner somewhere.) So I coaxed Cyril to bring me—granny wouldn't—and here I am. I *wish* I could stay and take care of you. But I suppose"—glancing from one to the other of the two young men—"it wouldn't do?"

Douglas smiled—a half-sad, half-tender smile.

"No, dear, it wouldn't do," he said with a touch of gentle reproof in his tone.

Sir Cyril gazed straight before him without speaking. Really, he was thinking in an exasperated sort of way, there was something positively uncanny about Bee's reckless disregard of *les convenances* at times.

"The sooner matters are settled between us the better," he breathed silently to his moustache. For, as it happened, Bee had given him no opportunity of "settling matters" as yet.

Bee knew quite well that he was angry; but she did not care in the very least. She straightened up the room a little with a few of those indefinable, subtle touches which

belong to women only, and made Cyril put some coal on the dying fire. Then, having received Douglas's assurances that Max Fenwicke was the best nurse in the world, and that he might be expected in at any moment now — when she had made him promise solemnly to let her know how he went on, and given him countless other injunctions, she went away — her sweet presence dying out of the dingy room like summer sunshine in a sudden storm, and leaving it dark and desolate.

Sir Cyril preserved an offended silence all the way to Portland Place. As for Bee, she was not thinking of him, and never even noticed his silence. But just as the hansom stopped at old Chandleur's door, she turned to her sulky companion and said — oh, ever so sweetly! —

“Cyril, you are the best and kindest fellow in the world, and I shan't forget your goodness to-night. Thank you most awfully.” And giving his hand an impulsive little squeeze, she sprang out without waiting for

his assistance, ran into the house, and disappeared up the broad staircase.

Sir Cyril's usually well-regulated heart beat quickly.

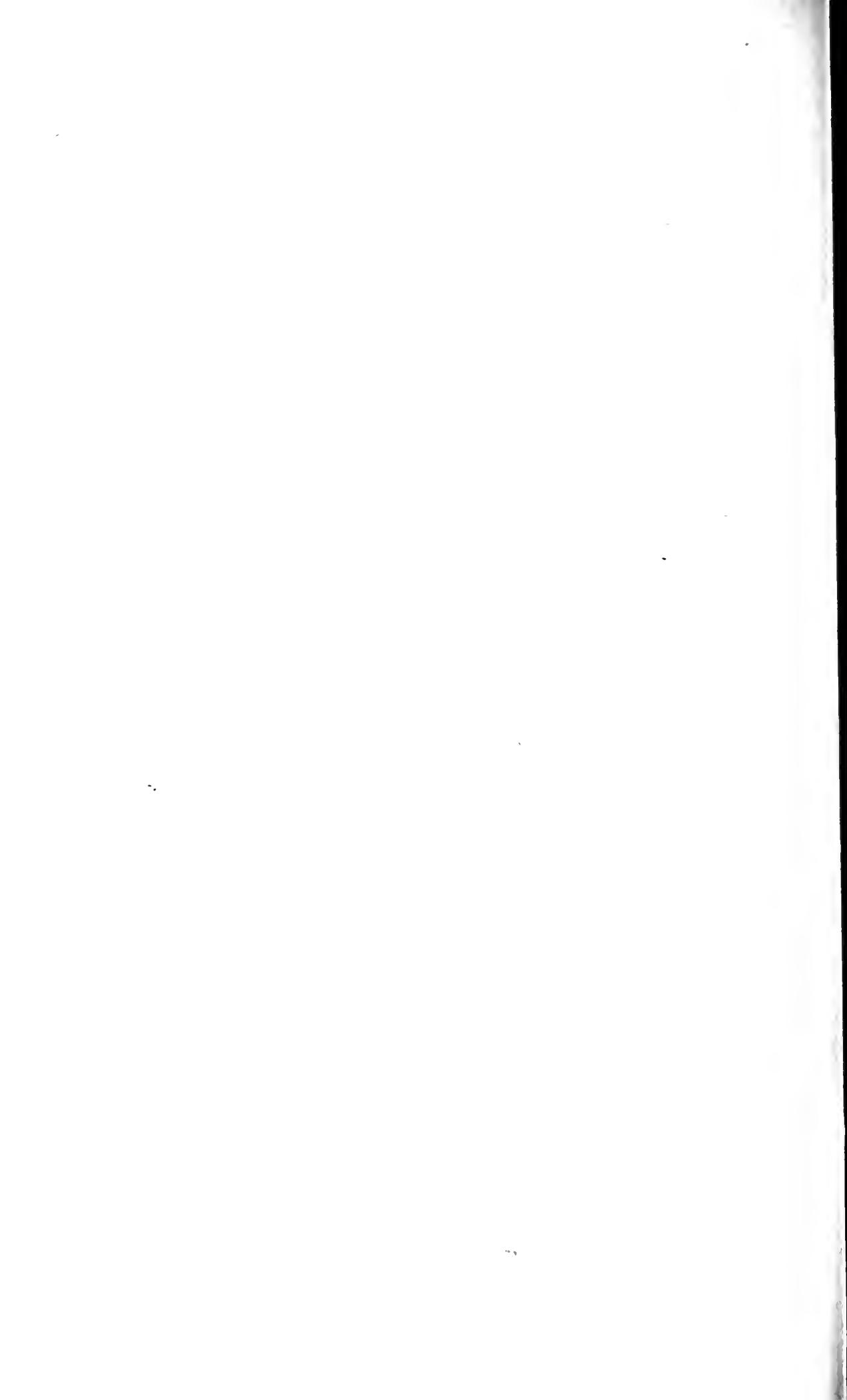
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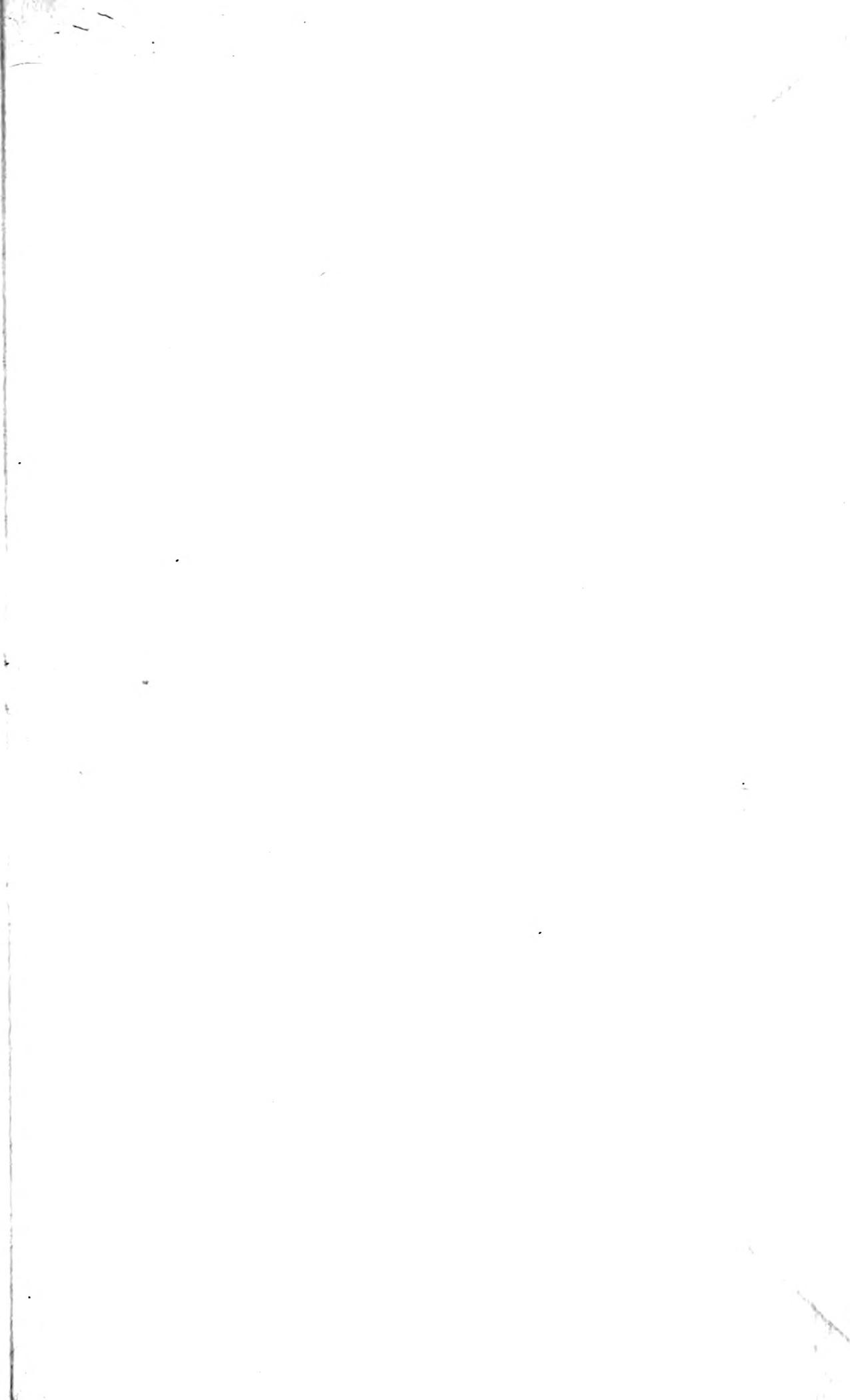
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